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A Paut Neteru Journey: An Autoethnographic Study of a Black Female Charter School Leader Using an Africentric Approach

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A Paut Neteru Journey: An Autoethnographic Study of a Black Female Charter School Leader

Using an Africentric Approach

by

Patricia Linn Williams

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2018

A Paut Neteru Journey: An Autoethnographic Study of a Black Female Charter School Leader

Using an Africentric Approach

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This dissertation written by Patricia Williams, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

5-30-2018
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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my foreparents, grandparents, parents, family, and African community ancestors on whose backs I stand. This work is dedicated to all children of the world, particularly of the African diaspora, past, present, and future. I, particularly, dedicate this work to Black female leaders within my own family who modeled exemplary leadership, my mother, Limmer Sue Williams and two of my aunts, Netherlene Turk and Helen Faye Wilson. Helen Faye Wilson, the first doctor of education in my family, served as my professional muse throughout most of my career as an educator. I dedicate this and all of my work, also, to my father, Jack Williams, who provided my first example of responsible manhood and fatherhood. A special dedication is extended to the Paut Neteru ancestors: Barbara C. Jordan, founding teacher; Frank Tinson, former parent and trustee; Chike and Sakile, siblings and former students who died in a fire while attending Paut Neteru; and Elijah Henry and Dennis Taylor, both former students lost to violence on the streets of DC before the age of 22. I dedicate this work to the Manchester (in Pittsburgh, PA) and DC communities, particularly the African-centered community of DC, where most of my lived experiences leading up to this event took place. Lastly, I dedicate this work to the founders, staff, students, parents, trustees, and stakeholders of the charter school about which this work is written, for believing in, engaging in, and contributing to a vision of the liberation of the hearts and minds of Black children.

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation seeks to examine the obstacles and experiences of a Black female charter school leader using an Africentric approach to educating Black children, and ways in which social and material inequalities may have shaped her journey. A conceptual framework that blends African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership is used to guide this qualitative autoethnographic study. Use of the autoethnographic method provides an opportunity to examine the relational dynamics of the experiences of this Black female charter school leader in the cultural context of the Black community and neoliberal education. Data analysis is captured from autobiographical storytelling within three key time periods, or epochs, of her 17-year experience starting, operating, and closing a charter school. Findings indicate how attempts to implement an African-centered approach to educating Black children in a DC charter school in the U.S. Eurocentric education model in the neoliberal era was compromised by neoliberal

policies. These findings also support the need to continue to examine how non-European

children can be educated, not just schooled, in a manner that places them at the center of their

learning, builds agency, and develops them into creative and critical thinkers and future builders.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
- Langston Hughes, "Dream Deferred"

I am the granddaughter of deferred dreams, of freedom, fulfilled purpose, and peace. My life is grounded in spirituality and service to God, family, and community. My maternal grandfather, Percy James Taylor, a sharecropper, fled Lineville, Alabama from the Ku Klux Klan, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was forced to temporarily abandon his wife and children with her parents and family. Percy Taylor was very musically talented with a personality larger than life itself. My maternal grandmother, Flossie Mae Craig Taylor, also artistically talented, wrote poetry and was a visual and musical artist. Her brother, while in the navy, sent money for her to attend Tuskegee Institute; however, her father did not believe girls should attend school, thus she did not attend. She became, instead, a devoted wife, mother, grandmother, and selfless servant for Christ. One of her deferred dreams was to visit the Holy Land, which she achieved using dollars received from a settlement from the steel mill after my grandfather died of prostate cancer. My mother's dreams of the pursuit of higher education were deferred until her children were grown, at which time she completed a master's in social work in her fifties. My father

never expressed his dreams, seemingly content with his role as provider, husband, father, and grandfather.

I grew up in an amazing family, church, and community. hooks (2015) shared the strong sense of place, belonging, and togetherness she experienced growing up in the South. She described her experience living in a marginal space where black people, though contained, exercised power, were truly caring and supportive of one another, and there existed a "sweet communion" of solidarity rooted in love, relational love, and care for one another. I experienced this sweet communion within my family, church, and community, and always felt loved and supported. Our teachers, doctors, and professionals lived in our community, including a doctor who made house calls. Growing up, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and have my own daycare center. I aspired to extend the sweet communion experienced and provide to others opportunities for a quality holistic education supported by a loving environment that provided a strong sense of place, belonging, and togetherness. As a teen, I taught Sunday school and worked with children in summer programs. Upon completion of my undergraduate degree in elementary education, my aunt, a college professor in education, coached me to pursue a master's degree in special education. Since completion of my master's degree in specialized professional education, I have committed most of my professional career to serving at-risk and/or special needs populations, as both a teacher and school leader.

Since 1990, I have been committed to African-centered education pedagogy and curriculum for children of African descent. I believe that such pedagogy, curriculum, and practice take into account and is designed to teach African children in a manner that takes their history, culture, identity, and politics into account for the ultimate purpose of solving their problems (Asante, 1988, 1991a, 1991b; Giddings, 2001; Hilliard, 1998; Hopkins, 1997; Wilson,

1993). I engaged in intensive study and travel, including classes in and conferences on African-centered education. Travel to Egypt with Dr. Asa Hilliard to study classical African civilization and the African diaspora (Senegal, Ghana, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico), blended with prior study, were tools toward my actualization of an African-centered education pedagogy and practice. I also used African-centered education, pedagogy, and practice as a rites of passage practitioner. In 1990, the founder of the oldest African independent school in the United States, located in DC and founded in 1968, recognized my work in the African community and awarded me with my African name, Ngozi Nkosisana Sigolwide, which translates to "blessed princess whose ways are straight."

While working as a public administrator for a nonprofit human services firm in Washington, DC, I was led to respond to a call for community members to open charter schools in the District of Columbia. I created a collaborative of community members (educators, parents, business owners) to explore the possible pursuit of founding a charter school, and, if so, the type of school it should be. In support of this goal, I attended workshops provided for prospective charter school operators. At the conclusion of a workshop on school budgeting, a White male charter school founder shared with me that he wished me well, while warning me that as an African American school leader I would not have access to existing funding and other opportunities that he would have as a White male.

These life experiences bring me to this point of my research to conduct an autoethnographic study on the obstacles and experiences sometimes encountered by leaders of color in the field of education. This autoethnographic study will explore the extent to which and the process by which the prediction of the White male school founder proved true. The prediction of the White male school founder may have signaled future challenges and

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experiences as a result of my race and/or gender. The encounter left me wondering what adversity awaited me in terms of systemic and layered issues of power and privilege, and/or investment in Black children, and/or equitable access to funding notwithstanding my race and gender.

In 1999, I wrote the application to open Paut Neteru Community Public Charter School as a family-friendly, African-centered community school. The name Paut Neteru is a pseudonym. In 1999, conditional, then full approval of the charter application was granted. In 2000, the school was opened with 75 students and eventually grew to over 300 students. The school's population was over 95% African American and high poverty in each of the 15 years of operations. My dream of creating an institution to serve children stood on the shoulders of countless deferred dreams (never to be realized) of my family and community ancestors. My dream, to start and operate a school, while I believe somewhat realized, continues the seemingly endless thread of dreams and aspirations thwarted by social and political factors, including institutional and systemic racism.

As executive director, I operated the school until 2015 when the DC Charter School Board did not renew the charter. Obstacles and challenges faced over the 17 years of starting, operating, and closing the school were numerous and rooted, I believe, in the racialization of the neoliberal education system in the United States. The vision was to provide a family-friendly culturally competent holistic community school for at-risk African American students. My uphill quest to serve as a charter school leader included obstacles such as: (a) securing and retaining a facility; (b) recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and leaders; (c) inspiring and incentivizing positive parental involvement; and (d) creating a school culture of academic excellence, holistic well-being, and cultural pride for children and adult stakeholders.

Throughout this autoethnographic study, I introduce personal reflections. My first personal reflection: I attended the first middle school in Pittsburgh, PA, Columbus Middle. Students attended Columbus Middle from a myriad of school neighborhoods on the North Side of Pittsburgh. My attendance there was the first time I attended a school outside of my neighborhood and in an integrated environment. As an entering seventh-grader, I tested to be placed in the 7-1 class of the nine classes of students for that grade. Most of my friends were placed in classes 7-5 to 7-9. There were fewer than five Black students in my classes. While I continued to excel academically, I felt socially isolated and impacted by the "tracking" method of student grouping. In eighth grade, I tested to enter the scholars program, a program that would have placed me on an accelerated track through high school, including college course credits. My parents allowed me to decide whether or not to enter the program. I declined the opportunity, given my strong need to matriculate alongside my friends. While I now believe that I made the wrong decision, I always appreciated and adored my parents for empowering me to make my own life choices. I later took advanced courses during the summer and graduated high school a year early. This personal reflection is an example of how the racialization of education in the 1960s, while providing new models such as middle schools, continued to limit opportunities for poor children and children of color, using culturally biased tests to determine the academic placement and ultimately academic future of students versus striving for more heterogeneous learning environments for students.

This study is an opportunity to objectively examine my experience starting, operating, and closing a public charter school, as a female educational leader of color. Use of the autoethnographic method will provide an opportunity to examine the relational dynamics of a

singular experience in the cultural contexts of the Black community and neoliberal education (Alexander, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Factors that impact the capacity of Black women leaders to ensure the provision of education to Black students, using an African-centered approach include: (a) systemic racism in local and national educational systems; (b) insufficient numbers of Black woman leaders; and (c) neoliberal education policies, including the privatization of education that has resulted in the closure of small neighborhood and/or Black-founded charter schools. Problems are presented below under the areas of Africentric education, DC's history of separate and/or unequal education, Black woman leadership, and neoliberalism and charter school movement.

Africentric Education

The inability of the U.S. educational system to properly address the cultural and educational needs of Black students continues to be one of the most perplexing problems in U.S. society (Hilliard, 1998; Hopkins, 1997; Shockley, 2007). As the population of Blacks and other groups increase, scholars note that the culture of schools has remained ethnocentrically White, the teaching force remains overwhelmingly White and female, and the academic achievement gap between Whites and other groups persist (Shockley, 2007).

The movement toward African centeredness began when Carter G. Woodson (1933) clarified that the education Blacks were subjected to in U.S. schools was not education at all, but rather miseducation. Woodson indicated that Blacks need an education that places them at the core of their own learning. African-centered education embraces the purpose of making the education that Black children receive relevant and meaningful to the Black community (Shockley, 2007). African-centered education is grounded in African history and culture.

Teachers of African-centered education should engage deeply with African history and culture because Blacks' roots are in Africa.

Asante (1990) submitted that African-centered ideas require a reorientation of thinking on issues pertaining to education, given that traditional lenses are often insufficient tools for understanding Black phenomena. Eurocentric education maintains the superiority of analytical thinking, while African American educational psychologists offer that Black culture is observed as circular and African Americans are more relational in their thinking (Hilliard, 1998; Nobles, 2015; Shockley, 2007). Hilliard (1998) explained that African American people tend to respond to things in terms of the whole picture instead of its parts, while European Americans tend to believe that anything can be divided and subdivided into pieces, and such pieces add up to a whole. The Eurocentric educational system omits the roles and contributions of entire groups of people in mathematics and history and suggests that Blacks should reorient their natural thinking processes (Asante, 1990). African-centered education corrects the historical record by bringing the cultural accomplishments, folkways, of Africans to the center of learning, so Blacks and others can learn from these histories and cultures.

Africentric education offers a holistic approach for bringing about a sense of agency for Blacks by using education as one vehicle for change in the Black community (Shockley, 2007). Some Africentric educationists believe that Africentric education attempts to equip Black children with self-knowledge for the purpose of instilling in them a sense of agency for the purpose of nation-building (Shockley, 2007). Shockley's study further reported that in recent years, many more established African-centered schools began moving away from general Africentric approaches and toward specific African cultural approaches, adopting the practices of a specific African group such as the Akan or Wolof people.

Black Woman Leadership

There are insufficient numbers of Black female leaders in education, in general, and insufficient numbers to lead schools, particularly charter schools, specifically with Black children. African American women have a history, across various social movements, of confronting obstacles and advocating for social justice and uplift (Valverde, 2003). African American female leaders have confronted and disrupted institutions thought to be responsible for the oppression of Black people during the Civil Rights Movement (Jean-Marie, 2005). When communities were segregated by race, many African American women embraced and accepted the social responsibility of ensuring that African American children had the necessary tools to be successful in a world that would deny them a quality of life (Jean-Marie, James, & Bynum, 2006). African American women were among the freedom fighters who integrated public schools, and later pursued higher education and professional careers (Jean-Marie, 2005). Many African American female leaders dedicated themselves to ensure that future generations of Black students were successfully prepared to embrace personal and societal challenges. African American women play a significant role in the lives of young people, in their communities, and as teachers and leaders. Many African American female leaders accept the responsibility to lead out of their social justice advocacy and attach to that responsibility reflective inquiry and discourse on how to transform practices that hinder students from equitable access to education (Jean-Marie, 2006; Valverde, 2003). Many African American female leaders commit themselves to taking marginalized students to a level of academic and personal success. These African American female leaders view Black students as the hope and future of the African American community, and thus want to leave an imprint on students to become academically competent in their professions, intellectually informed about social issues, culturally knowledgeable, and

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socially attentive to their own community as well as to the larger society (Jean-Marie, 2006; Verharen, 1996).

Many African American female leaders provide transformative educational leadership that enacts critical care. Critical care involves dispositions and behaviors related to empathy, embracing and exhibiting values, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance, and calculated risk-taking for the sake of justly serving students and improving schools (Wilson, 2016). African American female leaders possess the positionality to understand the obstacles Black children face, such as the reality of poverty given racialized conditions and other oppressive contexts, and can better prepare Black marginalized youth to achieve and succeed.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF; 2011), an independent children's advocacy organization based in Washington, DC, reported that African American or Black school students are more likely than a White child to be placed in special education programs designed to serve children deemed to have mental or emotional disabilities. Black students are more likely to be retained in a grade, and their suspension rate is higher than White students. Research has further shown that African American children often enter schools having to confront educators' low expectations of their intelligence, academic potential, and learning capabilities along with educators' deficit-based ideas about African American culture and their biases about those living in poverty (Delpit, 2006; Howard, 2008; Wilson, Douglas, & Nganga, 2013). African American students, moreover, usually possess cultural and social capital reflective of African American culture, experiential knowledge, and survival skills (Delpit, 2006; Khalifa, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Such qualities differ from the White, middle-class norms that govern the U.S. educational system, and thus are devalued. Such devaluing can create estranged and ineffective teacher-student relationships that further threaten the success of youth, leaving many African American

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students feeling disillusioned, disempowered, and/or uncared for (Howard, 2008; Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Intrinsic links between socioeconomic status, race, and educational attainment in the United States harshly position many African American students experiencing poverty to confront numerous structural barriers to attaining education success (Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2011). This reality points to the need for Black woman leaders, researchers, and reformers with the positionality, commitment, and passion to devise and implement systemic, equity-oriented educational solutions for Black students.

Neoliberalism and Charter School Movement

 Public education policy on a national level, as represented by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), sought to address continuing savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) in the U.S. education system, such as the perpetuation of the racial achievement gap, the high drop-out rate of Latinos and African Americans, ongoing school violence, and the lack of qualified teachers in high-need areas. Kozol (2005) argued that NCLB manifested as part of a larger structural framework that fixates on Black bodies as problems. Gillborn (2005) described the formation of the racialized subject and its society through education policy as a violent act. According to Clarke (2012), neoliberalism in education is found in the form of marketization, privatization, standardization, and accountability measures. Neoliberalism in education has been found to increase measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing, a practice with impacts that range from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008).

Despite the intent of the charter school movement and other education reforms to address racial inequalities in the U.S. education system, such as the perpetuation of the racial achievement gap, students of color fail to be served effectively in a holistic manner that ensures

students' academic, emotional, psychological, and physical well-being achievement and growth. Charters are a part of neoliberal reform, designed to promote equal opportunity to people of color and the poor. Because many people of color are concentrated in high-poverty urban communities, race is embedded in charter school policies (Duncan, 2014).

While neoliberal policies provide opportunities for community, individuals, and organizations to participate in public education, only organizations capable of accumulating large amounts of capital can effectively enter that space (Nygreen, 2017). Neoliberal education reform expects community individuals or organizations to understand themselves as a business and become smaller versions of corporations, thereby limiting or rendering ineffective other expressions of agency and identity (Nygreen, 2017).

Charters are given nominal autonomy over matters of curriculum and instruction while assuming responsibility for facilities and other major economic feats. The autonomy for accountability model of school reform grants an amount of freedom to the founders of charter schools, while placing a tremendous amount of responsibility on these individuals (Brett, 1998). Multiple pitfalls and barriers can complicate the development of charter schools and often influence their success or failure, including the lack of start-up funds and building sites, lack of organizational and financial skills needed for the sustained operation of the school, and policy and regulatory issues such as special education requirements, acquisition of Title funds, and the hiring of highly qualified teachers (Brett, 1998).

Charter school founders are expected to ensure the viability of a school by demonstrating expertise in the following areas: (a) start-up logistics, (b) curriculum and assessment, (c) governance and management, (d) community relations, and (e) regulatory issues (Brett, 1998). Charter school founders require expertise in terms of start-up logistics, building an

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organizational and leadership vision, acquiring a facility, establishing a legal entity, acquiring necessary start-up funds, and numerous other first steps.

Charters serving poor students often lack resources to fulfill their needs, and teachers lack necessary professional development (Bancroft, 2009). Recent studies link high-stakes testing to lower graduation rates and higher incarceration rates, indicating the significant role testing plays in expanding the machinery of the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for low-income students and students of color (Giroux, 2013).

Another consequence of neoliberal policy is the manner in which classroom management is approached. In the neoliberal era, classroom management has become synonymous with teaching (Casey, Lozenski, & McManimon, 2013). Casey et al. (2013) provided the historical context of classroom management as scientific management, rooted in slave-management, which is rife with neoliberalism and racism. Student behavior that is perceived as disobedient and disorderly is disciplined, and students are grouped and tracked based upon behavior. Giroux (2013) describes U.S. schools, since the 1980s, as having been refigured as punishment centers where low-income and poor minority youth are harshly disciplined under zero tolerance policies in ways that often result in them being arrested and charged with crimes more trivial than the punishment. The increased prevalence of standardization in education rhetoric along with continual tracking and punitive forms of assessment maintains the model of an educational factory with corporate logic, which perpetually reproduces unequal relations of power and provides economic worth to each student (Casey et al., 2013). The schooling experience, in the neoliberal era, prepares students to be a commodity.

Giroux (2013) has situated at the core of new reforms a commitment to a pedagogy of stupidity and repression that is geared toward memorization, conformity, passivity, and high-

stakes testing. The student's imagination is killed by un-reformers, while depoliticizing all vestiges of teaching and learning, rather than creating autonomous, critical, and civically engaged students (Giroux, 2013). Teachers learn to uphold the claims of educational meritocracy and the economic imperatives of education (Giroux, 2013). Giroux presented elements of a pedagogy of repression that includes students being defined by their shortcomings rather than by their strengths, being taught only to care about themselves and view consideration for others as a liability, being conditioned to unlearn any respect for democracy, justice, and what it might mean to connect learning to social change, being told they have no rights and that rights are limited only to those with power, and a pedagogy that kills the spirit, promotes conformity, and is more suited to an authoritarian society than a democracy.

Research Questions

This autoethnographic study addressed the following research questions through the lens of personal experience and review of documents:

- In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader of color?

- What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female school leader of color?

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this research was to analyze and interpret challenges and experiences during my journey as a female charter leader of color to expose issues that may be determinant for the limited representation of people of color, particularly women of color, in school leadership serving children of color and/or availability of African-centered schools to serve students of color. This autoethnography contributes to existing literature on transformational

leadership opportunities for women of color in education. It is my aim that the research and analysis process support the empowerment of women, particularly women of color, to aspire to social justice leadership and continue demanding social justice from within and for women and poor children of color.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework that blends African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership guided my work. This blended conceptual framework served as the lens from which the autoethnographic information was analyzed and interpreted. Use of this research method challenged me to connect theory, African-centered education pedagogy, Africana womanist theory, and transformational leadership theory with my own practice.

The collaboration of African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership served as a defining layer of my epistemological foundation. Using African-centered pedagogy and African womanism as tools for social justice were useful with this study, given the social complexities that compromise education. The complex relationship between race and society, for example, is one of the most apparent compromises to educational equity. Myers (2005) contended that while U.S. society has created the illusion that racism no longer exists, it is permanently stitched into the quilt of society. In this study, I exposed the challenges of implementing an African-centered curriculum and practice in a Eurocentric education model in the neoliberal education era. Foster (2005) exposed the racist and sexist roots of educational research (as mostly all educational researchers were White, Protestant, male members of faculties at such institutions as Harvard, Stanford Teachers College, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, and Yale during the 1950s and 1960s).

The use of a qualitative autoethnographic method through an African-centered pedagogical lens challenges dominant Eurocentric epistemology. This epistemological perspective presumes that there is only one way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2005). My intention was to integrate cultural resources as a researcher of color to conduct a study that empowers, nurtures, and provides strategies and skills to confront and overcome oppressive conditions for the oppressed.

Methodology

This research employed the qualitative method of autoethnography to present a critical narrative of my quest for transformational leadership within an African-centered construct as a female educator of color. I explored my experience as a female leader of color to set the stage to discuss the obstacles encountered during my journey serving poor children of color in a public charter school setting, using African-centered pedagogy and practice in a neoliberal era of public education.

I laced my story as a Black female leader within the social context of the research in the areas of African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership (Reed-Danahay, 1997). My experiences as a Black female leader illuminate the social and material inequalities and obstacles that a Black female leader of color can experience.

Limitations

I embraced the subjective nature of the autoethnography, as the method calls for me to contribute wholly to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Ratner (2002) suggested that identifying our subjectivities enables us to strengthen our objective comprehension of the world. My goal was to conduct a study that used my intellect, emotions, spiritual intuition, experiences,

and personal reflection to provide an in-depth investigation of my experience as a Black female charter school founder and leader.

Chang (2007) suggested the following limitations of the autoethnography methodology: (a) excessive focus on self in isolation of others, (b) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, (c) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source;, (d) negligence of ethical standards related to others in self-narratives, and (e) inappropriate application of the label of autoethnography. To avoid suggested limitations as autoethnographer, I engaged the following approaches: (a) reflect the interconnectivity of self and others, (b) stay focused on research purpose, (c) support arguments with broad-based data, (d) protect confidentiality of people in the story, (e) clearly define autoethnography, and (f) use systematic coding procedures.

Delimitations

This study focused both on the ways in which social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a female charter school leader of color, and on the lessons learned from experiences and obstacles I encountered on my journey as a female school leader of color. It is assumed that these topics of investigation will have an impact on aspiring school leaders of color and efforts of higher education to prepare educational leaders in a neoliberal education era.

Definitions and Terms

Africentricity/Afrocentricity: seeking to examine every aspect of the subject place of Africans in historical, literary, ethical, philosophical, economic, and political life (Asante, 2000).

African-centered education: designed to center learning, for Black students, in their own cultural information (Asante, 1991b).

African worldview: Afrocentric worldview emphasizes the relevance of traditional African culture in contemporary life (Dixon, 1976; James-Myers, 1987).

Africanist Womanism: an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women (Hudson-Weems, 1988).

Autoethnography: a self-narrative that can be done by anthropologists, nonanthropologists, and autobiographers who lace their life story within the social context of the research (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Black Feminist Thought (BFT): a framework that focuses on the experiences of African American women (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1989).

Education: the process of transmitting from one generation to the next, knowledge of the values and all the things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness (Shockley, 2007).

Internalized Oppression: the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society (Pheterson, 1986).

Neoliberalism: a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005).

Racialization: Omi and Winant (1986) and Winant (1994) used the term to indicate the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Frantz Fanon (2004) contrasted social conditions that were racializing against those that were humanizing, demonstrating how racial oppression organizes and constrains a universal

recognition of human capabilities. Fanon's usage of racialization is posed as a necessary precondition for colonial domination and a hindrance to the process of internal self-making among Black subjects. HoSang and LaBennett (2014) described racialization as an ideological process that produces race within particular social and political conjunctures; a process that constructs or represents race by fixing the significance of a relationship, practice or group within a broader interpretive framework (HoSang & LaBennett).

Schooling: process designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European American elite in its social order (Shujaa, 1994).

Transformational Leadership: in a democratic context means that leaders must lead for social justice while promoting dialogue rather than using their authority (Weiner, 2003).

Womanism: the term "womanism" is centrally located in the sociohistorical and linguistic worldview of Black women (Troutman, 2002), was coined by Alice Walker in 1983, and has been later used and refined by other African American women writers such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1993).

Organization of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to my personal and professional life and interconnections of my cultural experiences as an African American female school leader with social justice issues, within an African-centered pedagogy and practice and Africana womanist and Black feminist lens.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the literature. The analysis highlights Black women school leaders, past and contemporary. The analysis also provides a historical review of education reform that led to African-centered education, pedagogy, and practice. The analysis

continues with an assessment of African-centered education through the lens of critical

pedagogy, leading to the elements of critical leadership for social justice. I subsequently present

the analysis of transformational leadership as a framework. I provide a historical review of

models of educational leadership that led to the emergence of transformational leadership. I will

then explore its blending with African womanism and other critical pedagogy leading to the

examination of leadership opportunities for female leaders of color.

Chapter 3 describes in detail the autoethnography methodology of the study. Chapter 4

provides the autoethnographic data, based upon: (a) visual tools; (b) inventories, school artifacts,

familial and societal values and proverbs, cross-cultural experiences; (c) chronicles of

autoethnographer's educational history, and typical day and week; (d) reading and responding to

other autoethnographies and self-narratives; and (e) collections of other field texts such as

personal journals, field notes, letters, conversations, documents, photographs, and school

artifacts. Chapter 5 presents the interpretation and analysis of my autoethnographic story, studied

through the lenses of my conceptual framework. The chapter concludes with implications and

recommendations derived from the analysis of the data in its relationship to the existing literature

and general educational leadership practices in the field.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature is designed to frame the autoethnographic research and ground my story. Literature on Black women school founders is presented to provide both a historical and contemporary context to my experience as a Black female charter school founder and leader. Literature on Africanist womanism and Black feminism provides a context for the experiences of Black women in the United States and the way in which gender and race impact those experiences.

Literature on African-centered pedagogy and education is presented to illustrate the historical complexities of the positionality of Blacks in America and ways in which the Eurocentric U.S. education systems have failed to be inclusive of the history, experiences, and contributions of non-White or "other" educational leaders and learners. Such literature is also presented to illustrate the importance of cultural identity to one's ability to be holistically centered, as a human being aiming toward productive citizenry. The provision of African-centered education to Black students, in terms of both content and methodology, was of high priority to me as a charter school founder aspiring to serve Black children of high need. The literature included on Afrocentric education is presented to ground its purpose and importance to the proper centering of children of African descent as agents of their own education and life experiences. The literature on Afrocentric education is also intended to differentiate schooling from educating and the roles of each, particularly for children of color.

Literature on neoliberal policies is presented to illustrate some of the policies of the neoliberal era of education and the consequences for educators endeavoring to serve children, particularly those poor and/or of color. Literature on transformational leadership is designed to

indicate the trends in educational leadership and implications for leaders in public education. Literature presented on autoethnography is designed to inform the reader on the history, purpose, and features of this qualitative method of research.

Black Women School Founders

Literature on the history and presence of Black women school founders in America is presented to provide a context for my experience as a Black female charter school founder and leader. The African American community established schools for their children from the beginning of their experiences in America (Anderson, 1988). During the enslavement of Africans in America, great risks were taken by many enslaved to learn to read and write (Douglass & Stepto, 2009). Piert (2013) described how newly emancipated African Americans intensely desired an education that they hoped would pave a path for participation within U.S. society with all the rights and privileges of first-class citizenry. Such desires were not realized, as the capitalist elite of both the North and South offered a dual or separate system of public education, legitimated by law, whereby schools that educated Black children were poorly funded and housed in dilapidated buildings. In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education decision declared this dual system separate and unequal. The African American community was hopeful, again, that Black children would receive a quality education and receive the opportunity to fully participate in the American dream. The price of integration for African American communities, however, was the forfeit of many of their own schools, curriculum, teachers, administrators, and culture (Piert, 2013).

Black women school founders in the early twentieth century, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, founded schools for Black girls and young women (Bair, 2009). These women, building on the legacy of late 19th-century

education advocates such as Fanny Jackson Coppin and Lucy Laney, used education as a tool for racial uplift. These women were on a mission that combined educational, social, and economic goals and shared the belief that Black women had to assume the initiative in educating themselves and their people (McCluskey, 1997). All three women were born in the South and profoundly influenced by the injustices of Jim Crow America (Bair, 2009). The parents of Burroughs moved to Washington, DC, and parents of Hawkins moved to New England to receive a better education, each providing examples of how Black parents have historically made personal sacrifices to position their children to receive a better education and opportunities. Also noteworthy are Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, who devoted their careers to working within public schools in Washington, DC. Bethune, Burroughs, and Brown founded their own schools and assumed direct control over curriculum, staffing, and most fund-raising efforts, three major components of operating a charter school. It is on the backs of these ancestral Black women founders that contemporary Black women founders, such as me, stand and serve their communities.

Black feminist scholars, exploring the struggle for consciousness and self-definition experienced by Black women, describe how these women navigated multilayered and interlocking oppressive structures based on gender, class, and race (Higginbotham, 1992; Hill Collins, 1999; Johnson, 2000) and chose courses of action that advanced their aims (McCluskey, 1994). Like her enslaved ancestors, Bethune experienced firsthand how a lack of literacy separated her from Whites, and after an incident where she was told books were not for her, she vowed to learn to read and never have to feel inferior again (Bair, 2009). Bethune, inspired by Lucy Laney, a former slave and well-known founder and educator, devoted much of her life to Black children gaining the power of literacy.

Brown, at age 19, built her own school. As one who secured funding and financing for the construction of a $5,000,000 facility, I marvel at the vision, resourcefulness, and fortitude of Brown. While Bethune, Burroughs, and Brown lived and worked before the dawn of the full-fledged Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, their efforts to achieve incremental progress toward racial justice warrant recognition (Bair, 2009). I am humbled by and proud of the example that preceded me of vision, commitment to service, and intellect displayed by Black women founders at the turn of the 20th century.

A historical tradition within the African American experience of educating its own children, along with inequities and underachievement in the public schools, became the impetus for the development of independent Black schools in African American communities in the early 1960s (Piert, 2013). Black parents, frustrated and disillusioned with the public-school system, sought alternative educational options for their children, including African-centered schools (Piert, 2013).

Piert (2013), while acknowledging a paucity of research on founders of independent black schools, wrote of a Black female founder of an independent Black school. This Black female founder of an independent Black school described by Piert converted her independent school to a charter school. This Black female founder of an independent Black school experienced and endured opportunities and obstacles quite parallel to my experiences as a Black female charter leader, including: (a) both are Black female teachers; (b) vision is embedded and enmeshed within similar social, historical, political, and cultural perspectives; (c) both are committed to the education of children; (d) both served as advocates for African American children; (e) both share common educational philosophies (e.g., African-centered curriculum and belief in the whole child, including intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual); (f) both founded

schools in response to a community need; (g) both endured struggles with those of varying ideological thought (e.g., African independent versus charter school); (h) both endured major facility and/or funding challenges; (i) both were exposed to great leaders, activists, and agents of change for social concerns and issues of African American people (e.g., Haki Madhubuti, Dr. Asa Hilliard); and (j) both were impacted by neoliberal policies, for example, charter school laws, including making personal sacrifices to sustain the school.

Marva Collins, a contemporary Black school founder, started the Westside Preparatory School in Chicago, Illinois. Collins was approached by a group of neighborhood women organizing a community school to serve as its first director. Collins, with assistance from Daniel Hale Williams University, opened Daniel Hale Williams Westside Preparatory School in 1975 with four students, including her daughter (Collins, 1986). Collins is the only secondary principal to have been offered the post of Secretary of Education by two consecutive U.S presidents, in addition to being offered Los Angeles County superintendent of schools, as well as a seat on Chicago's Board of Education.

Collins (1986) viewed children as the victims, not the culprits. Collins advocated for school reform that included strong principals who care more about children than personality polls, politics, or job preservation, and most importantly, well-trained, highly respected, well-compensated teachers in front of classrooms at every level and in every strata of society. Collins attained high levels of success with her students as she nurtured each child and pledged to never let one student fail. Collins motivated children and made them believe in themselves and want to achieve. Collins believed students should be encouraged and praised rather than punishing them. Collins's success as a teacher of high-performing students drew national and international attention from ivy-league universities, U.S. educators, and international educators from as far as

Germany and Spain. Collins was born in the South like Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown.

Dr. Lorraine Monroe, a contemporary Black female school founder, founded the Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school in Harlem, in 1991, in the belief that caring instructors, a disciplined but creative environment, and a refusal to accept mediocrity could transform the lives of inner-city kids. Monroe's experiment was a huge success (Monroe, 1999). The Academy has been regarded as one of the finest schools in the country, sending graduates to Ivy League colleges. The key to the school's success: a unique leadership method Monroe calls the Monroe Doctrine, which Monroe developed through decades as a teacher and principal in some of America's toughest schools (Monroe, 1999). Dr. Monroe pulls no punches in her passion, and takes issue with the best and worst teachers, and encourages educators to adopt the best traits of those who surround them.

Africanist Womanism

Africanist womanism and Black feminism will serve as the lens for my voice to describe my experiences as a Black female charter school leader. Africanist womanism is the identity that I choose over Black feminism as a woman of African descent that exists as part of the African diaspora, versus just America. I embrace the Africanist womanism framework as it takes into consideration the merging together of experience, awareness, and action (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Sexism and racism, as experienced by Black women in America, will be outlined, starting with the slave experience, then within the feminist and Black liberation movements.

Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience

Sexism has impacted Black women throughout U.S. history in all aspects of daily living: employment, health, civil rights, law, education, and so forth. (hooks, 2015). hooks provided a

historical context for sexism and the Black female by examining the Black female slave experience, where the overlapping of the race and sex discourse began. hooks referenced how black women's bodies were where racism and sexuality converged. hooks reported that sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of Black women. hooks traced sexism back to the European homelands of White colonizers, where sexism was an integral part of the social and political order of White colonizers, and enslaved Black women were gravely impacted. hooks reported that enslaved black people accepted patriarchal definitions of male-female sex roles, aligned with their White owners, including the notion that the woman's role entailed remaining in the domestic household, rearing children, and obeying the will of husbands.

While not invalidating feminism as a political ideology, hooks (2015) provided a historical reflection of racism and feminism in the United States as she exposed the racist foundation of every women's movement in the United States. hooks described the women's rights movement as having mirrored the racial apartheid social structure that characterized 19th- and early 20th-century American life. hooks outlined how the racism White females felt toward Black women manifested in the women's rights movement, the women's club movement, and in the work arena. Nineteenth-century White woman's rights advocates attempted to make their lot synonymous with that of the Black slave as a means of drawing attention away from the slave toward themselves.

While White women in the women's movement may have needed to make use of the Black experience to emphasize women's oppression, they did not focus on the Black female experience. They chose, instead, to deny the existence of Black women and to exclude them from the women's movement (hooks, 2015). Some Black women, interested in women's

liberation, formed separate Black feminist groups (hooks, 2015). hooks expressed that, by

creating segregated feminist groups, these groups both endorsed and perpetuated the very racism

they were supposedly attacking, failed to provide a critical evaluation of the women's

movement, and offered to all women a feminist ideology uncorrupted by racism or the

opportunistic desires of individual groups. hooks further reported that, as colonized people have

done for centuries, the Black women accepted the terms imposed upon them by the dominant

group, White women liberationists, and structured their groups on a racist platform identical to

that of the White-dominated groups they were reacting against. White women were actively

excluded from Black groups. In fact, the distinguishing characteristic of the Black feminist group

was its focus on issues relating specifically to Black women. Black female activists ceased to

struggle over women's rights issues and concentrated their energies on resisting racism, when

Jim Crow apartheid threatened to strip Black people of the rights and achievements they had

acquired during Reconstruction (hooks, 2015).

Black Feminist Thought

African American women face systemic oppression based upon both race and gender.

Generally speaking, Black feminist thought (BFT) is a framework that focuses on the

experiences of African American women (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1989). Orbe, Drummond, and

Camara (2002) wrote, "Black feminist thought constitutes a conceptual approach that reflects the

special standpoints that African American women use to negotiate their positioning of self,

family, and society" (p. 123). BFT encourages Black women to speak on matters that may be

difficult, rare to hear about, and/or controversial (Collins, 2008; Lorde, 2007). McClaurin's

(2001) concept of Black feminism is defined as an embodied, positioned, ideological standpoint

perspective that bears Black women's experiences of simultaneous and multiple oppressions as

the epistemological and theoretical basis of a pragmatic activism directed at combating social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black women's well-being.

BFT highlights the oppression that Black women face at the intersections of race and gender, while creating a space for their voices as Black women (hooks, 1989). Black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw uses the multidimensional experiences of Black women to demonstrate that a single-axis (e.g., race or gender) analysis is ineffective in capturing the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) recommended an intersectional analysis that analyzes experiences at the intersection of multiple categories (e.g., race, class, and gender), because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism when addressing the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Collins (2008) asserted that intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and oppressions work together in producing injustice. Collins (1986) discussed the "outsider within" (p. 14) as a position from which Black women can speak. Collins (1986) viewed the intersectional identities such as race, gender, class, and so on, to be of benefit, and the Black feminist scholars as one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints may enrich contemporary sociological discourse.

By focusing on intersectionality, BFT emphasizes interlocking oppressions (Collins, 1986), which have also been understood as "multiple consciousness" (King, 1990, p. 69). When interviewed about multiple consciousnesses, Black women offered their insight on what it means to be oppressed at the intersections and how they deal with this oppression (Orbe et al., 2002). Some women described past experiences that "left them wondering if the problems were caused by racism, sexism, both, another issue, or simply a personality conflict" (Orbe et al., 2002, pp.

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128–129). This autoethnographic research explored ways in which social and material inequalities shaped my journey at the intersection of my race, gender, and class, as a Black female charter school leader.

Black Feminism and Black Liberation

hooks (2015) discussed how sexism in the 1960s diminished and undermined the power of all Black liberation struggles. Based upon patriarchal values, Black liberation was equated with Black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over Black women. hooks further discussed how the Black liberation struggles in the 1960s included a sexist emphasis on Black female submission and silence in the name of liberation. hooks shared how Black females clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for Blacks to be free.

Africanist Womanism

African womanist thought (AFT) serves as a framework or lens for me to use my voice to describe my experiences as a Black female charter school leader. While some African American women choose Black feminist to define themselves, the Black feminist label fails to satisfy other African American woman who use the term womanist. The term womanism is viewed to be centrally located in the sociohistorical and linguistic worldview of black women (Troutman, 2002)—was coined by Alice Walker in 1983 and has been used and refined by other African American women writers such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1993). A womanist believes in the goal that all should work for the benefit of the whole community, and all African American females and males should contribute to that effort (Walker, 1983). Womanists, Walker (1983) believes, should share a worldview of social philosophy, which emphasizes the primacy of a supportive social network of women, family, and community. Womanism is more attractive to

many African American women to endorse, as it implies the idea of African American unity and African American Nationalism.

Ogunyemi (1993) provided another definition of womanism, influenced by Walker's definitions of the term womanist. Ogunyemi's definition describes womanism as: a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of Black womandom; and Black unity empowers each Black person to be a brother, a sister, a father, or a mother to the other. Both views, that of Walker (1983) and Ogunyemi (1993), celebrate African American roots and the need and call for African American unity. Both Walker and Ogunyemi focus on the entire African American community and have advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a broader struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice (Collins, 2008). Moreover, Ogunyemi views a womanist as one who, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, must integrate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy. Unlike feminists, Ogunyemi emphasized issues that most concern African American women, womanists, and activists to be race, culture, and the economy.

Hudson-Weems (1988) argued that Africanist womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent, grounded in African culture, and necessarily focused on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. Hudson-Weems believes that African American women should create their own paradigm and name and define themselves. According to Hudson-Weems, relations between African American women and African American men are different than those between White women and White men. For African American women, the men in their community are not seen as oppressors; rather they are seen as partners in the fight for the great cause of racial equality. Hudson-Weems contended that

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racism, classism, and economic injustice supersede sexism (Maparyan, 2011). Ogunyemi (1985) renamed her perspective African womanism in 1996, to further show the importance of the concept of both genders working together for a better humanity. Maparyan (2011) explained that a central theme in African womanism justifies Black women as leaders in organizing, mediating, reconciling, and healing a world overrun with conflict, violence, and dehumanization. Womanism concerns global reorganization and healing versus women's issues, and encompasses all oppressed people, men included, as a human problem. Dove (1998) advanced an imperative of Afrikan Womanism struggle as the herstorical (versus historical) attempt by Afrikan women, particularly mothers, to regain, reconstruct, and recreate a cultural integrity that espouses the ancient Maatic principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, and order.

The womanist concepts of empowerment, independence, interdependence, struggle, and activism have naturally found their way into the field of education. Womanist educators were exhorted to use their sense of collective responsibility to help the masses of African Americans understand and act on their rights as citizens in a democracy (Higginbotham, 1992; Perkins, 1983). African American female educators find themselves fighting for a voice and for those who are underserved (Berry, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Karpinski, 2006; Loder, 2005). For many of these women, being an educator is more than a job; it is a vocation, a calling, and a responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2004; Loder, 2005). hooks (1994) described the calling for womanist educators to use education as a movement that does away with boundaries and makes education the practice of freedom. Just as the foremothers Bethune, Burroughs, and Brown, contemporary African American women, particularly in the field of education, felt compelled to work for the disenfranchised (Case, 1997; Collins, 2008; hooks, 1994; Ladson-

Billings, 2009; Maparyan, 2011). American female educators incessantly reflect on the suffering people endure, and many prefer to work with the oppressed. They challenge social injustice and extend their united support to oppressed individuals all over the world (Comas-Diaz, 2008; DeLaney & Rogers, 2004; Williams, 2005).

hooks (1994) suggested that the survival and future of the urban community could and can still be found in the schoolhouse. African American female educators face not only the task of providing a solid academic experience, but also the task to prepare students for life beyond the safety of the classroom (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Case, 1997; King & Ferguson, 2011; Patterson, Mickelson, Hester, & Wyrick, 2011). The African American female educator, moreover, produces a pedagogy that blends teaching what is mandatory with nurturing an understanding and pride in African American culture and history (King & Ferguson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2011). Like her foremothers, the African American female educator is committed to providing racial uplifting for the betterment of those disenfranchised (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Patterson et al., 2011).

Black Women and Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, originated by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, recognizes the following characteristics: practices are distributed collaboratively among staff members; and relationships are interdependent and involve parents, community members, and professional staff (Lambert, Zimmerman, & Gardner, 2016). Proponents of transformational leadership include Burns, Leithwood, Kellerman, Henke, Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (Lambert et al., 2016).

Darder (2016) spoke of the notion of critical leadership as a pedagogical practice beyond the traditional hierarchical and individualistic banking model of leadership. Darder described critical leadership as a practice that draws practitioners toward an understanding of leadership as

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a social phenomenon that must exist communally and evolves pedagogically, through open structures of participation. Darder wrote about critical leadership, encouraging the vision to be learning together as a way of life where the world is transformed as community through humanizing inquiry and decision making, where the common good stretches across our differences and our institutional priorities.

Darder (2016) described the purposefulness of critical leadership as reflecting commitment to conditions of labor and life that create opportunities for collective empowerment and self-determination—with a particular focus on those who most experience disempowerment, alienation, or isolation. Wilson (2016) highlighted the benefits of transformational educational leadership that enacts critical care as a viable means of serving students of color impacted by poverty. Wilson questioned the extent to which poor African Americans are educationally cared for in the United States given the inequities and educational struggles they systemically face. Wilson suggested that the care for marginalized youth in a critical way, as a social complex and politically conscientious process, is a need that not all educators undertake. Wilson, in her profile of a Black female transformational educational leader, advocated for the use of critical care that encompasses empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance, and risk-taking to advance student learning and social justice with poor children and children of color, as well as the infusion of critical care theories into transformational leadership frameworks and practice.

In this neoliberal era, Bogotch (2017) described school leadership as cultural and contextual or local, influenced by global forces. Bogotch argued against neoliberal policies and that education should be constructed locally by community communications and dialogue based on the interest and needs of people. Bogotch argued that the challenge for educational leadership is pedagogical and curricular; that is, to reconstruct a more inclusive notion of the other locally,

as a socially just response on behalf of public education. Bogotch further affirmed the challenge for educational leadership to shift our intellectual and dispositional activities taking into account the diverse values and needs of ourselves and the other. This study will explore my experiences and obstacles during my journey aspiring to serve as a transformational leader in a neoliberal era of education.

Black Woman's Leadership

Hall and Gray (1998) provided a working definition of Black women's vision of leadership and that the leadership of Black women (LBW) is comparable to Black feminism. Hall and Gray further suggested that LBW is about the empowerment of human beings to claim ultimate fulfillment. Within LBW, leadership acts as a process of both individual empowerment and is collective and nonpositional. King (1998) suggested that the vision of Black women's leadership is interwoven with the vision of the members of a Black community, because Black women's leadership aims at affecting change for all people. Collins (2008) viewed Black women's visionary leadership as an Afrocentric feminist sensibility to political activism. Collins viewed this as an empowering activist mode of leadership that initiates resistance, and believed that Black women's leadership is transformative and makes leaders out of followers. Collins posited that Black women's leadership keeps the community and home together as a united group, uses an Afrocentric way of leading, is centered on a humanist vision, influences people through everyday experiences, and works for institutional transformation.

African-Centered Pedagogy – A Transformative Practice

Scholars report the intensification of attention to issues related to "race" and "race relations" in the social sciences to have begun with the Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954 and again with the civil rights movements of the 1960s (Darder & Torres, 2004). Darder

and Torres reported, further, that critical race theory (CRT) emerged as an offshoot of critical legal theory, after black critical legal scholars pointed to the failure of critical legal theory to engage questions of "race" within the framework of alternative views. Darder and Torres reported moreover that, based upon the belief that extensive national dialogue on race relations takes place in the context of education, African American and Latino scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Daniel Solorzano, Dolores Delgado Bernal, and Laurence Parker began to blend their arguments in education policy with CRT. These scholars insisted that race occupy the central position in educational policy analysis. Racial liberation was embraced as the most significant objective of any emancipatory vision of education or the larger society.

Afrocentricity, as a theory of human liberation and intellectual critique was initially a project of practical social reform for industrialized, complex, heterogeneous nations (Asante, 2000). Asante presented Afrocentricity as a means of reconciliation over social and cultural hegemony by accepting the agency of the African person as the basic unit of analysis of social situations involving African-descended people. Afrocentricity seeks to end White world hegemony and obliterate the mental, physical, cultural, and economic dislocation of African people by thrusting Africans as centered, healthy human beings in the context of African thought (Asante, 2000). Asante explained that while Afrocentricity, as a theory, provided a critical step toward achieving community harmony, acceptance of the subject position of Africans within the context of historical realities was a necessity for progress to be made in interpretation, analysis, synthesis, or construction. Each system that depended on the degradation of the African worldview, the denial of African humanity, and the ignoring of African achievements in civilization to enhance its own rationalization would have to be confronted (Asante, 2000). Asante described Afrocentricity as seeking to examine every aspect of the subject place of

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Africans in historical, literary, architectural, ethical, philosophical, economic, and political life. Afrocentricity, Asante clarified, does not seek African hegemony; it seeks pluralism without hierarchy.

Asante (2000) provided a historical context for American Blacks and the system of public education. Asante documents the presence of 4,500,000 African refugees in the United States at the end of the Great Enslavement in 1865. Asante documented the literacy rate for these Africans in America as having leaped from 5% to nearly 50% in one generation, within 35 years after 1865. During Reconstruction, Asante reported, the African population voted and ran for political office, and once in office, created many innovations such as public schools and public highways. A consequence of the signing of the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, which allowed the Southern Whites additional privileges, was that the Union Army that had protected the 4,000,000 Africans of the Southern states was withdrawn from the South and a reign of terror set back social progress for generations (Asante, 2000).

Asante (2000) described the 1960s as the romantic period, when many Americans considered Martin Luther King, Jr. to be a hero, given some advances for Blacks during the Civil Rights era. Asante shared that there was a growing sentiment after Malcolm X that African Americans and Africans in general needed a self-defining and self-determining attitude toward social, economic, political, and cultural issues, with such reform being an intense interrogation of the African person's concept of space and time. For 500 years, African people had been removed from all terms, operating in someone else's intellectual space and time frame, which meant that African people could not actively pursue their own direction without conflicting with the perception that Whites would have to change for progress to occur (Asante, 2000).

African-Centered Education

Molefi Asante is seen as the pioneer of Afrocentricity (Asante, 1991a). African-centered education is designed to center learning for Black students in their own cultural information. Hilliard (1998) argued that problems for Blacks in education are inseparable from problems for Blacks as people. Because educational systems often are mirror-images of the societies in which they exist (Asante, 1991a; Hilliard, 1998), Black children educated in a society that does not support their African culture are only seen and see themselves as being acted upon. Eurocentric education teaches Black students to despise their own culture (Adams, 1997). Woodson (1933) describes the U.S. educational process as one which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that the oppressor is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, yet at the same time depresses and crushes the spark of genius in the Negro by making the Negro feel that the Negro race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. Asante (1991b) explained that information being conveyed in U.S. classrooms is White cultural information in most cases, and the curriculum in most schools is a White self-esteem curriculum. Asante described further how, in order to master the White cultural information, non-White students experience the death of their own culture and the phenomenon does not register with teachers (Asante, 1991b).

In an African-centered approach to teaching, content and process are important. Ladson-Billings (1998) shared research on the case for the application of a culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings described culturally relevant pedagogy as resting upon three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success, (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. In African-centered education,

the teacher's role is to make the student's work and the classroom congruent, ensuring language, examples, and concepts are relevant (Asante, 1991b). Teachers are expected to read information from the cultures of their students and present information in ways that are meaningful to the students. Ladson-Billings (2006) exposed the shortcomings of teacher preparation programs to ensure teachers are careful observers of culture and cultural systems to avoid teachers contributing either to the culture of poverty or the poverty of culture.

Hilliard (1976, 1983) has led the critique of testing mechanisms that position African Americans as cognitively deficient. In addition to criticizing the Stanford-Benet and other standardized tests as culturally biased, Hilliard is critical of the whole educational (i.e., tracking, special education placement) and judicial systems that reinforce and justify the racist social order. Asante (1991b) called for a transformation of the Eurocentric curriculum content of public schools. Asante's position is that education can provide cultural models of what is possible; therefore, in the absence of Afrocentric content, African American youth are deprived of self-affirmation, while racist attitudes are reinforced among other children.

Effect of Trauma, Racialization, and Oppression on People of African Descent

Byrd and Jangu (2009) affirmed that the developing of African-centered learning communities can be especially challenging because of the Maafa and the ongoing negative attitudes and behaviors toward Africa and people of African descent. The Maafa is the term suggested by African-centered scholar, Marimba Ani (1994), to describe the terrible occurrence of enslavement and murder of Africans and the destruction of African cultures, first by Arabic forces, then by Europeans, and the continuing oppression and intergenerational efforts of this trauma on people of African descent today. Byrd and Jangu recommended the following as key elements in implementing African-centered education including: (a) learning basic community

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needs, (b) recruiting and retaining committed African-centered professional, (c) attaining support from those in power and community to support professional growth and development of educators, and (d) learners' need to be loved and appreciated as people of African descent by culturally competent educators with high expectations for them.

Omi and Winant (1986) used the term *racialization* to indicate the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Frantz Fanon (2004) contrasted social conditions that were racializing against those that were humanizing, demonstrating how racial oppression organizes and constrains a universal recognition of human capabilities. Fanon's usage of racialization is posed as a necessary precondition for colonial domination and a hindrance to the process of internal self-making among Black subjects. HoSang and LaBennett (2014) described racialization as an ideological process that produces race within particular social and political conjunctures; a process that constructs or represents race by fixing the significance of a relationship, practice, or group, within a broader interpretive framework. Usages of the term racialization serve as a foundation to convey relations of power and authority in U.S. political cultures, including systems of education (HoSang & LaBennett, 2014).

Internalized oppression has negatively affected the function of African Americans as a group (Gainor, 1992; Lakey, 1995). Gainor and Lakey outlined ways that internalized oppression negatively affects the function of a group, including: (a) damaged self-respect; (b) irrational attacks on leaders; (c) divisiveness in the group; (d) defensive patterns of fear, mistrust, withdrawal, and isolation from others of same race; also, feeling ashamed of one's fear of others of same race; (e) tolerating, proliferating, and internalizing other oppressions, such as classism, sexism, adultism, etc.; and (f) pessimism. Lipsky (1977) provided a historical context for some

of the specific behaviors associated with internalized oppression to have originally been developed as survival tactics. Oppressed people often take out their hurt and frustration where it is relative safe:-on each other, when they feel powerless to challenge or confront the agents of their oppression. Negative beliefs, furthermore, get acted out or manifested towards the self, toward others who share the individual's racial identity, and towards those from other groups of color in very hurtful ways (Duran & Duran, 1995). Myers and Finnigan (2018) described how even educators of color can struggle with internalized oppression within a system that privileges Whiteness.

African-Centered Education – Writing the Wrongs

Ladson-Billings (2006) described further how the U.S. education system looks at students as individually responsible for their success in school versus understanding the complexity of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students. Shujaa (1994) echoed how some of the most intelligent advocates of public school education continue to blame the victim as if children have the capacity to educate themselves. Shujaa shared how these same advocates overlook the ever present political, racial, and economic reality of the major consumers of public education, Black and Latino children. Shujaa spoke to the way in which White supremacy (racism) manifests itself freely in the structure and systematic destruction of millions of unsuspecting children and their parents. The elephant in the room remains to be the horrible connection between Africans and Europeans that Shujaa compels not be forgotten, negated, or minimized. Shujaa stated how the African holocaust is seldom explored or taught in our schools, and the relationship of White slave trader to enslaved African has been the glue connecting the two entities for over a millennium.

Shujaa's (1994) work provides a historical context for the perspective of the African American on education. Shujaa provided evidence of early writings that demonstrate that African Americans, as far back as the 1860s viewed education as a birth right in the same light as freedom. One point of evidence is the fact that the first two institutions that African Americans built from the ground up were schools and churches. Dubois's (1940) Cooperative Commonwealth advanced a culture-based plan for African American socioeconomic recovery. Among a series of progressive measures, DuBois called for a self-imposed tax to fund autonomous schools and capitalize on the existing organizational resources of African American churches.

Karenga (1998) explicitly conceived Afrocentricity as a distinct continuity of DuBois' corrective for historically Black colleges and universities. I embrace Maulana Karenga's (1980) conception of culture where a group functions optimally as a cultural collective when it is able to autonomously and consciously employ their own historic reality to redefine themselves, celebrate themselves, and generate an ethos of which members are proud and which outsiders respect and appreciate. Karenga (1980) created Kawaida as a philosophy of African cultural reaffirmation and restoration. In 1965, Maulana Karenga founded the Us organization as the authoritative arm of his Kawaida philosophy. The expressed goal of Us was to provide a philosophy, a set of principles, and a program that inspires a personal and social practice that transforms people in the process, making them self-conscious agents of their own liberation. Karenga (1995) asserted that Kawaida facilitates a multicultural world based on mutual respect and mutual recognition of all peoples' right and responsibility to speak their own cultural truths. The Kawaida philosophy challenges African Americans to attain a consciousness that appreciates and embraces an African worldview as familiar and beneficial.

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The normative component of this philosophy is the Nguzo Saba (seven principles), an African cultural value system positioned as a key to individual and collective liberation, and the foundation for the Kwanzaa holiday ritual. Kwanzaa, which means "essence" is taken from the Ki-Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza" and is conceived and designed by Karenga (1977) as the African American recreation of Ancient Egyptian (Kemetic), Nubian, Asante, and Yoruba "first fruit" festivals. Kwanzaa is fueled by these seven principles that are expressed in Ki-Swahili, the most populous African language and has been adopted by many Americans as a focal point of reconnecting with the African world view.

The *Umoja* (unity) principle advocates collective self-conception in terms of family, community, nation, and race. *Kujichagulia* (self-determination) encourages autonomy in identifying and determining the nature and character of a collective African American destiny. *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility) promotes charity and communal accountability over selfish individualism. *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics) is designed to liberate communities from the economic control of non-community members. *Nia (*purpose) promotes construction of institutions for cultural revival. *Kuumba* (creativity) addresses the need to adhere to a dynamic African aesthetic that reaches beyond enticing the senses, to move the heart and motivating goodness. Finally, *Imani* (faith) calls on the spiritual orientation of African people, for confidence that all principles will be actualized. The ritual holiday of Kwanzaa was designed to facilitate active internalization of these seven ideals. Kwanzaa is designed to promote what is seen as the best of African ritual traditions. In his account of the Dagara worldview, Malidoma Some (1993, 1994) argued that ritual has redemptive power. Some (1994) provided powerful examples of the use of community rituals in his village, Dagara, in Dano, Burkina Faso, West

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Africa, including the Circle. The Circle in Some's village was used to host and hear individual and community affairs and celebrations.

Frederick Phillips (1990) offered *Ntu* therapy as a culture-based psychological treatment. Phillips asserts that *Ntu* therapy affirms a spiritual-intuitive oriented worldview, rather than a rational-scientific. The guiding principles of *Ntu* are harmony, balance, interconnectedness, cultural awareness, affective epistemology, and authenticity. The ultimate goals for clients who undergo *Ntu* therapy are directed toward valuing and functioning within the guidelines of Kwanzaa's seven principles. Shujaa (1994) reported that since the age of integration, a fight has persisted to educate African Americans, and that Black schools and the Black church led the modern fight for full educational and political equality. Shujaa described the fight as a battle for an equal and level playing field in all areas of human endeavor, not to sit next to White children in a classroom.

The independent Black school movement grew out of the Black empowerment struggles and initiatives of the sixties resulting in the development of African-centered schools around the country (Shujaa, 1994). The Council of Independent Black Institutes (CIBI) is the professional organization established by the African-centered independent schools. These African-centered leaders were influenced by Black struggle and the work of W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Marcus Garvey, Harold Cruse, Chancellor Williams, E. Franklin Frazier, Mary McLeod Bethune, and others (Shujaa, 1994).

Africentric education is viewed to purport to offer a holistic approach for bringing about a sense of agency for Blacks by using education as one vehicle for change in the Black community (Shockley, 2007). Some Africentric educationists believe that Africentric education

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attempts to equip Black children with self-knowledge for the purpose of instilling in them a sense of agency for the purpose of nation-building (Shockley, 2007).

Education versus Schooling

Shujaa (1994) differentiated between education and schooling. Shujaa defined schooling as a process designed to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structure that support those arrangements. Shujaa further explained how schooling exerts an influence on members' achievement expectations through policies, e.g., tracking and testing, reward systems (grading, and awarding credential), and patterns of human interaction (e.g., social inclusion and exclusion) that reinforce and are reinforced by the society's structural conditions.

Shujaa (1994) viewed the role of public schools in the United States to include: (a) foster the development of adequate skills in literacy, numeracy, the humanities and technology; (b) instill citizenship skills based upon realistic and thorough understanding of the political system, and support such skills by promoting questioning and critical thinking skills and teaching democratic values; and (c) provide historical overviews of the nation, the continent, and the world which accurately represent the contributions of all ethnic groups to the body of human knowledge. Shujaa maintained that public schools, upon achieving the three goals above, would constitute a significant step toward empowering all citizens with the kind of skills needed for full and equal participation in the society. Shujaa argued that it is an inappropriate interpretation of public schooling's societal role to expect it to provide for the achievement of ethnic pride, self-sufficiency, equity, wealth, and power for Africans in the United States, goals that require a collective cultural and political world view.

Shujaa (1994) further put forth that a world view can only be transmitted through a process of education strategically guided by an African American cultural orientation and an understanding of how societal power relations are maintained. Shujaa, in advocating the importance of Black students receiving an education (versus schooling), expressed the importance of Black students having a deep understanding of the political, racial, economic, scientific, and technological realities that confront the very survival of African American people locally, nationally, and internationally.

Shujaa (1994) advanced the following as keys to achievement for Black children: (a) possess a deep understanding of the world in which they will have to function, with such knowledge anchored in positive self-concept and an environment that encourages growth; (b) realize that all education is foundational, introducing and reinforcing values in school and non-school settings; and (c) understand that successful development is difficult with a quality education, but almost impossible without one.

Shujaa (1994) believed it to be the responsibility of each adult generation of African Americans to ensure the existence of an educational infrastructure for transmitting knowledge to their progeny. Shujaa offered the following as steps in fulfilling such responsibilities: (a) develop collective practices for determining what cultural knowledge is to be transmitted; (b) assess the extent to which cultural knowledge is being transmitted in schools, churches, early childhood programs, and other settings where organized learning takes place; and (c) create new resources to satisfy any aspects of the cultural knowledge base not addressed by existing facilities. Shujaa argued that the meeting of cultural responsibilities by African Americans can be facilitated by understanding the linkages that exist between the process of school and the oppression of people of African descent.

Asante (1988) argued that African consciousness may be fostered by embracing traditional African cultural values and one way to this conscious orientation is through Afrocentric curriculum reform. Asante (1990) maintained that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have more motivation for school work. The first National "Infusion of African and African American Content in the Curriculum" conference (Hilliard, 1998) exhibited the collective expressions of John Henrik Clarke, Asa Hilliard, Wade Nobles, and Ivan Van Sertima that there are qualitative and quantitative benefits for African American youths who are exposed to their heritage in school. This study will explore the extent to which social and material inequalities were racialized as a result of: (a) the Africentric focus, and (b) the leader and/or staff and/or students were the "other" or Black.

The District of Columbia's History of Separate and/or Unequal Education

The provision of education for Black students and school leadership in the District of Columbia are grounded in racial and political inequities. A paper on the history of school superintendents in the District of Columbia from 1865 to spring 2000 reveals major issues of race (Anderson, 2000). In 1805, when the City of Washington organized its public schools, including establishing a board of trustees for which the first president was President Thomas Jefferson, the public schools were available only for White students, primarily boys (Anderson, 2000). The initial private schools for free colored students were founded by slaves, who had been recently freed, and a private donor (Hine, 1960).

The District of Columbia Education System is unique in that the Congress approves its budget and it once was controlled by the U.S. Congress. The District of Columbia could be identified as a colony as it continues to be denied full representation in the Senate or House of

Representatives and Congress has, periodically, intervened in its affairs. In 1900, two separate school divisions were established: one White, one colored. In a report undertaken in 1911 by the superintendent, findings revealed the District was behind in the construction of new buildings and the dual school system for colored and White children was adding greatly to school expenses. In 1954, Bolling v. Sharpe, a companion decision to Brown v. Board of Education, created one integrated system.

Congress consistently underfunded the District schools, and particularly underfunded programs for Black students. Even in 1862, when an act of Congress required 10% of all taxes collected from persons of color be set apart for the purpose of initiating a system of primary schools for Colored children, the total collected was an insignificant amount compared to the total school budget and amount needed, and the majority of the students were Black (Anderson, 2000). Later in 1864, Congress ordered DC Schools to set aside the proportion of school funds to match the proportion of colored children in the school population.

Anderson (2000) chronicled a 200-year history of public and private schools in Washington, DC. Anderson's chronicling reveals a pattern where local school organization and governance were controlled by the Congress and structured around issues of race. Until 1967, Black superintendents and board members led the Black systems or divisions, and Whites guided the White and Mixed systems, resulting in the development of Black school leaders and teachers (Anderson, 2000). While this segregated school system facilitated the availability of Black school leaders and teachers, Black leaders and teachers served Black children in inadequate facilities, Negro teachers had larger class sizes that White teachers, and there were insufficient numbers of Negro teachers, and operating budgets were insufficient. The DC school system has had superintendents that promoted heterogeneous grouping of children and teacher

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accountability for test scores among other issues. Lawsuits have been filed against the District, including in 1971, where the judge declared that educational services were not equally distributed and teachers and teachers' salaries needed to be equitable (Anderson, 2000).

DC's school system has a history of not supporting African-centered education. Dr. Andrew E. Jenkins, III served as superintendent in 1988. Dr. Andrew Jenkins believed that he lost his job because of his desire to introduce an Afrocentric curriculum (Anderson, 2000). Dr. Jenkins showed his support for Afrocentric education in one way by creating an assistant superintendent for Afrocentric education. I was one of four to five professionals interviewed to serve in the position. Dr. Jenkins was terminated from his position before he could make the appointment.

Neoliberal Policies and Their Consequences

Darder (2016) provided a historical context for neoliberal policy to be in the midst of the antiwar movement and civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, as the U.S. university was challenged to break with its lily-White, male, and class-privileged tradition. Darder located the seeds of neoliberalism in the long-term authoritarian strategies put in place by conservatives who sought to win an ideological war against liberal intellectuals. Darder referenced a national report issued by Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 as an aggressive political move by neoliberal conservatives to redefine the purpose and practice of public education. Darder attributed a political culture of greed as the cause for rise to neoliberal multiculturalism—a conservative ideology of difference that deploys meritocratic justification to explain and legitimate inequalities. The neoliberal educational vision included the belief that the U.S. public school system should function as an economic engine. Education in this neoliberal era is thus increasingly positioned as a consumer good subject to individual choice and

competitive markets (Casey et al., 2013). Casey et al. asserted that imagining schools as nothing more than publicly funded private enterprises, to be understood and governed in accordance with best (business) practices, renders any attempt at challenging and transforming the oppressive realities of schools limited. Hursh (2008) noted neoliberalism as the dominant political ideology in the United States and having substantial influence on education at all levels, from national policy to classroom instruction. According to Clarke (2012), neoliberalism in education is found in the form of marketization, privatization, standardization, and accountability measures. Neoliberalism in education has been found to increase measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing, a practice with impacts that range from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008).

Critical educators and scholars are encouraged to rid their practices and discourses of neoliberalism in the hopes of enabling a more humanizing, just classroom and schooling experience for all teachers and learners, notwithstanding the potency and power of neoliberal ideology that is indicative of the global marketization of virtually every element of the public sphere (Casey et al., 2013).

Policies

Public education policy on a national level, as represented by NCLB, sought to address continuing savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) in the U.S. education system, such as the perpetuation of the racial achievement gap, the high drop-out rate of Latinos and African Americans, ongoing school violence, and the lack of qualified teachers in high-need areas. Kozol (2005) argued that NCLB manifested itself as a part of a larger structural framework that fixates on Black bodies as problems. Leonardo (2013) described people of color as objects of the knowledge industry called schooling, as they are either victims of its imposition or targets of its

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improvement such that school reform's success is dependent on the alleviation of their plight. Leonardo suggests that NCLB could be No "Colored" Left Behind, as the Black figure arguably became the litmus test for the initiative's ability to decrease the achievement gap. Gillborn (2005) described the formation of the racialized subject and its society through education policy as a violent act. While neoliberal policies provide opportunities for community individuals and organizations to participate in public education, only organizations capable of accumulating large amounts of capital can effectively enter that space (Nygreen, 2017). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Task Force on Quality Education (2017) recommends the elimination of for-profit charter schools, arguing for increased accountability, and against an inherit conflict of interest and widespread findings of misconduct and poor student performance of for-profit charter schools. Neoliberal education reform expects community individuals or organizations to understand themselves as a business and become smaller versions of corporations, thereby limiting, or rendering ineffective, other expressions of agency and identity (Nygreen, 2017). Bogotch (2017) predicted that neoliberal policies and practices will remain for as many years as entrenched wealth and power permit. Bogotch suggested the need to see neoliberalism as a dynamic antecedent to a new global and more diverse world where educational responsibilities will continue, to challenge the fixed and almost transcendent state of new-liberalism, and to reconstruct programmatic responses.

Charter schools – a neoliberal policy. Charter schools, as publicly funded schools of choice, are the offspring of the ongoing struggle among advocates of vouchers, magnet programs, alternative education, and other reform initiatives (Brett, 1998). Charter schools supplement school choice reforms with additional forms of choice: (a) charter schools grant parents and teachers the ability to create and attend a new school free from most bureaucratic

restraints, in accordance with their own vision; and (b) parents and teachers have the ability to transform, or restructure, an existing school to obtain organizational, fiscal, and curricular autonomy, in the case of a conversion school (Brett, 1998). Charters are a part of neoliberal reform, designed to promote equal opportunity to people of color and to the poor. Because many people of color are concentrated in high-poverty urban communities, race is embedded in charter school policies (Duncan, 2014). Through processes of racialization, race manifests in government policies in overt and covert ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Miles & Small, 1999; Small, 1994; Winant, 1994). In the 1990s, individuals, communities, and organizations viewed charters as an opportunity for educational self-determination and community autonomy. As a personal reflection, I viewed charters as an opportunity to fill a need for meaningful schooling and education for high-need students of color and the school community to be self-determined.

Charters are given nominal autonomy over matters of curriculum and instruction while assuming responsibility for facilities and other major economic feats. The autonomy for accountability model of school reform grants an amount of freedom to the founders of charter schools, while placing a tremendous amount of responsibility on these individuals (Brett, 1998). Multiple pitfalls and barriers that can complicate the development of charter schools and often influence their success or failure include the lack of start-up funds and building sites, lack of organizational and financial skills needed for the sustained operation of the school, and policy and regulatory issues such as special education requirements, acquisition of Title funds, and the hiring of highly quality teachers (Brett, 1998).

Charter school founders are expected to ensure the viability of a school by demonstrating expertise in the following areas: (a) start-up logistics, (b) curriculum and assessment, (c) governance and management, (d) community relations, and (e) regulatory issues (Brett, 1998).

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Charter school founders require expertise in terms of navigating start-up logistics, building an organizational and leadership vision, acquiring a facility, establishing a legal entity, acquiring necessary start-up funds, and surviving numerous other first steps.

Consequences

There are consequences to approaching education through a neoliberal lens. Giroux (2013) described the corporate school reform movement as determined to underfund and disinvest resources for public schooling so that public education can be completely divorced from any democratic notion of governance, teaching, and learning. In addition to the defunding of public schools, social and economic policies, including the mass incarceration of poor minorities, are being enacted by Republicans and other right-wingers to ensure low-income and poor minority students fail in public schools (Giroux, 2013). Charters serving poor students often lack resources to fulfill their needs, and teachers lack necessary professional development (Bancroft, 2009). Recent studies link high-stakes testing to lower graduation rates and higher incarceration rates, indicating the significant role testing plays in expanding the machinery of the school-to-prison pipeline especially for low income students and students of color (Giroux, 2013).

Another consequence of neoliberal policy is the manner in which classroom management is approached. In the neoliberal era, classroom management has become synonymous with teaching (Casey et al., 2013). Casey et al. provided the historical context of classroom management as scientific management, rooted in slave-management, which is rife with neoliberalism and racism. Scientific management focuses on centralization, command, control, discipline, obedience, order, rules, and time. Student behavior that is perceived as disobedient and disorderly is disciplined, and students are grouped and tracked based upon behavior. Giroux

(2013) described U.S. schools, since the 1980s, as having been refigured as punishment centers where low-income and poor minority youth are harshly disciplined under zero tolerance policies in ways that often result in students being arrested and charged with crimes more trivial than the punishment. Giroux outlined the sentiment of billionaire un-reformers and titans of finance such as Bill Gates, Rupert Murdoch, the Walton family, and Michael Bloomberg, to be that public schools should be transformed, when not privatized, into adjuncts of shopping centers and prisons. The increased prevalence of standardization in education rhetoric along with continual tracking and punitive forms of assessment maintains the model of an educational factory with corporate logic, which perpetually reproduces unequal relations of power and provides economic worth to each student (Casey et al., 2013). The schooling experience in the neoliberal era prepares students to be a commodity.

Giroux (2013) placed, at the core of new reforms, a commitment to a pedagogy of stupidity and repression that is geared toward memorization, conformity, passivity, and high-stakes testing. The student's imagination is killed by un-reformers while depoliticizing all vestiges of teaching and learning, rather than create autonomous, critical, and civically engaged students (Giroux, 2013). Teachers learn to uphold the claims of educational meritocracy and the economic imperatives of education (Giroux, 2013). Giroux presented elements of a pedagogy of repression to include: (a) students are defined by their shortcomings rather than by their strengths; (b) students are taught only to care about themselves and view consideration for others as a liability; (c) students are conditioned to unlearn any respect for democracy, justice, and what it might mean to connect learning to social change; (d) students are told they have no rights, and rights are limited only to those with power; and (e) pedagogy kills the spirit, promotes conformity, and is more suited to an authoritarian society than a democracy.

Giroux (2013) argued that the fundamental challenge facing educators within the current age of neoliberalism, militarism, and religious fundamentalism is to provide conditions for students to address how knowledge is related to the power of both self-definition and social agency. Giroux maintained the importance of providing students with the skills, ideas, values, and authority necessary for them to nourish a substantive democracy, recognize antidemocratic forms of power, and fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on system economic, racial, and gendered inequalities.

Critical pedagogy is presented as an antidote to neoliberalism. Critical pedagogy, Giroux (2003) suggested, must: (a) be understood as central to politics, rather than disconnect public education from larger social, economic, and political issues; (b) view education as part of an emancipatory project that rejects the privatization and corporatization of public schools and the tax and finance forces that support iniquitous school systems; (c) support a culture and the relations of power that provide teachers with a sense of autonomy and control over their conditions of labor; (d) view teachers as pubic intellectuals and a valuable social resource; and (e) reject teaching being subordinated to the dictates of standardization, measurement mania, and high-stakes testing. This study explored experiences and obstacles impacted by neoliberalism during my journey as a female school leader of color operating a school serving poor children of color, particularly in the areas of high-stakes testing, behavior and classroom management, and school performance evaluation.

History of Educating Black Children in the District of Columbia

Anderson (2000) presented research that reveals a history of major issues of race, control by Congress, and insufficient facilities and/or an underfunded facilities budget for Black students, from 1865-2000. Anderson revealed that: (a) until 1967, Black superintendents and

board members led the Black systems or divisions, resulting in the development of Black school leaders and teachers; (b) the Government of the District of Columbia is unique in that it is controlled by the U.S. Congress; and (c) there existed a consistent pattern of underfunding school facilities by Congress and the city council. There was also a pattern by the Congress to consistently underfund the district school, then step in periodically to restore solvency. The Congress intervened in District affairs at will, including: (a) in 1864, ordered that the municipalities of the City of Washington, Georgetown, and District of Columbia set aside the proportion of school funds to match the proportion of colored children in the school population and made education compulsory; (b) in 1866, required that the Cities of Washington and Georgetown turn over to the trustees of the colored schools the money, sites, buildings, improvements, furniture, and books owed to them by law; (c) organized the County of Washington; and (d) established charter schools in the District (Anderson, 2000).

Since 1804, there have been 17 different governance and administrative structures (Anderson, 2000). The chartering authority was created in 1996 by the DC School Reform Act of 1995 as a second independent authorizer of public charter schools in DC. The first charter schools opened in 1996. In 1996, the presidentially appointed DC Financial Responsibility and Management Board (informally known as the Control Board) reduced the authority of the elected school board and gave the elected school board the authority to select the district superintendent. DC voters, in 2000, narrowly approved a referendum that allowed the mayor to appoint four of the nine school board members. The Control Board suspended its activities on September 30, 2001.

DC has a history of segregated schools even beyond Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. Colored schools of Washington and Georgetown educated Black children until 1900

(Anderson, 2000). In 1900, two separate school divisions were established: one White, one Colored. In 1954, Bolling v. Sharpe, companion decision to Brown v. Board of Education, created one integrated school system. In 1996, the authority of the Board of Education was suspended until the year 2000, at which time the powers of the Mayor, City Council, and Board of Education were given by the Congress to its appointed Control Board.

Anderson's (2000) research reveals issues between 1865–2000 that persist: (a) DC continues to be denied full representation in the Senate and House of Representatives; (b) Congress still controls the DC budget and intervenes periodically; and (c) issues relating to race still affect decision-making by the elected bodies and many believe that access to quality education revolves around a family's economic status.

Chapter Summary

The theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in this chapter was designed to ground my story and subsequent research findings and recommendations. The literature provides an exploration of: (a) Black women school founders, as a historical and contemporary context to my experiences and obstacles as a Black female charter school founder; (b) the complexities of African womanism and Black feminism and the connection of gender identity to my experiences and obstacles encountered as a female school leader; (c) Black women and transformational leadership grounded my efforts to embrace and implement an effective transformational leadership model as a charter school leader; (d) the complexities of Afrocentric/African-centered education and possible impacts of the racialization of education in a neoliberal era of education on Black students, teachers, and leaders; (e) neoliberal policies and consequences to efforts to operate a charter school that focuses on the education and schooling children of color; and (f) the history of separate and unequal education for Black children in the District of Columbia.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As much as we would like to believe in American public schools as the great equalizer, it is not reasonable to expect public schools to transform social injustice because they are cut from the same social fabric of American society that has generated the practices of oppression and inequality in its institutions throughout our history.

--Murrell, 2002

The purpose of this chapter is to describe autoethnography as a qualitative research method, provide the rationale for using autoethnography as methodology for this study, and specify the research design and analysis and how I told my story.

Research Questions

Two questions inform the focus and direction of this autoethnographic study, in an effort to critically reflect upon the social and material inequalities and obstacles often experienced by female leaders of color. This intimate process of examining a journey in my life, as a female charter school leader of color, should offer increased understanding of the social phenomenon of leaders of color aiming to serve children of color in the midst of the current neoliberal education era. These questions include:

- In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader?
- What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female charter school leader?

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography as a method fits this study as it promotes investigating personal experience and how the personal interacts with culture. Autoethnography has emerged as a genre of qualitative research that is part autobiographical, part cultural, and part personal. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggested that autoethnography is a form or representation that allows the researcher to focus "outward on social and cultural aspects of their experiences" (p. 739). As such, the researcher uses self-analysis and self-reflection within the context of social and cultural experience. Reed-Danahay (1997) defined autoethnography as a "self-narrative" that can be done by anthropologists, non-anthropologists, and autobiographers who lace their life story within the social context of the research. Michele Foster (2005), in her exploration of issues of race and prejudice in research, argued that new alternative research paradigms help free researchers from the racist, sexist, and class baggage from the traditional positivist approach.

This research uses the qualitative method of autoethnography to present a critical narrative of my quest for transformative leadership, within an African-centered construct, as a female educator of color. Autoethnography is an ethnographic inquiry that uses the autobiographic materials of the researcher as the primary data and emphasizes cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher's behaviors, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society. Chang (2007) outlined further that authoethnography should be ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation.

Alexander (2013) described critical autoethnography to be like capturing a picture of yourself in a glass borderless frame; a picture in which an image of you is represented and there are sightless borders of containments called race, sex, gender, culture, and occasions of human

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social experience fixed in time and space, floating in a fixed liquidity of memory, giving shape to experience, structuring vision and engagement with the intent for others to see and know you differently as you story the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context. Alexander described, further, that the critical in critical autoethnography captures a moment in that borderless frame and holds it to a particular scrutiny—intersplicing a sociology-of-the-self with a hermeneutics of theorizing the self. Alexander described that in the process of such an engagement, there is always a feeling of risk; a risk of bleeding in which the presumed categorical containments of your identity threatens to exceed its borders, revealing the ways in which we are always both particular and plural at the same time; never contained and always messy.

I approached this critical autoethnography like capturing a picture of myself in a glass borderless frame; a picture in which an image of me is represented and there are sightless borders of containments like race, sex, gender, culture, and occasions of human social experience, fixed in time and space, floating in a fixed liquidity of memory, giving shape to experience, structuring vision and engagement with the intent for others to see and know me differently, as I storied the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context (Alexander, 2015). I captured moments in that borderless frame and held them to scrutiny (Alexander, 2015). I faced feelings of risk from bleeding, in which the presumed categorical containments of my identity threatened to exceed its borders, revealing ways in which I am both particular and plural at the same time (Alexander, 2015). I opened myself to engage in the explication of my lived experience in a cultural context, beyond the false boundaries that limit social possibility—whether that be the migration of identities across place and space, or the limitations of what I am supposed to be

based upon the presumed fixity of sex and gender, or the historical points of culture and clan affiliation (Alexander, 2015). I addressed the intersectional nature of my identity.

Selection of autoethnography methodology is designed to enhance cultural understanding of the issues faced by the autoethnographer and transform self and others toward coalition building. Use of this method, designed to connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), is intended to mesh with the central theme of culture in African-centered pedagogy and practice. I used my experience as a female leader of color to set the stage to discuss the obstacles encountered during my journey, serving poor children of color in a public charter school setting using African-centered pedagogy and practice in a neoliberal era of public education.

Foster (2005) reported that academics rarely connect their theory with their own practice. Use of this research method challenged me to connect theory, African-centered education pedagogy, AFT, and transformational leadership pedagogy with my own practice. I embraced the understanding among autoethnographers that the personal is cultural and the cultural personal, because the individual and culture are mutually influential and inextricably linked (Chang, 2007). Cultural frameworks, through which education is imparted to students, in this study is further at the center of the examination of how African-centered education and practice can better serve Black students versus an Eurocentric approach to education.

The Research Design: Writing an Autoethnographic Study

I focused outward on social and cultural aspects of my experiences as a charter school leader of color, using self-analysis and self-reflection (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I laced my story as a Black female leader within the social context of the research in the areas of African-centered pedagogy, AFT, and transformational leadership (Reed-Danahay, 1997). The choice of

autoethnography as method freed me, as a researcher, from the racist, sexist, and class baggage from the traditional positivist approach (Foster, 2005).

Alexander (2013) suggested that the autoethnography can be: (a) self-reflexive of sociopolitical interactivity; (b) a narrative of lived experience in a sociocultural context, weaving story and theory; (c) an illumination of the complex intersectionality of being and becoming; and (d) an act of resistance and a struggle for self-definition that bleeds the boarders of the expected and the known—the present and the possible voices struggling to be heard between complex and overlapping borders of identity. Alexander challenged the autoethnographer to approach the methodology as an "outing" of the personal as a component of the autoethnographic pedagogy. Alexander suggested an approach to autoethnography wherein critical explication of human experience results, giving voice to experience as a means of realizing, personalizing, foregrounding, and sharing histories and happenings in relation to the politics of culture and scholarship.

My experiences as a Black female leader illuminate the social and material inequalities and obstacles that a Black female leader of color can experience, as documented in the literature. I recounted my experience as a charter school leader in evocative detail, hoping to captivate readers within the emotional context of my experiences. I connected my experience with the theories of African-centered pedagogy and practice, African womanism, and transformational leadership, through a critical analysis and discussion of the knowledge and meaning that emerge from the autoethnographic material.

The central element driving and orienting the data collection process was my recollection of events, epiphanies, and experiences as a Black female charter school leader. My experiences compiled and presented using hindsight because of their relevance to the overall theme of

leadership for women of color and the connection of these experiences to the questions that inform this study. The autoethnography is structured mostly as a chronological evocative narrative of my experiences during three key epochs of this 17-year experience, from 1999–2016. The three key epochs include School Start-Up & Opening, School Operations – Me as Leader, and School Closing.

Various techniques, outlined by Chang (2007), were used to facilitate recall, organization of memories, and events as data, including, but not limited to: (a) collecting other field texts such as personal epochs, letters, official and pop culture documents, photographs, personal-family-social artifacts, and life experiences; (b) visual tools; (c) school artifacts, familial and societal values and proverbs, and cross-cultural experiences; and (d) chronicling the autoethnographer's educational history.

The critical interpretation of the data was grounded in the following strategies (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007): (a) review of published studies related to this research for comparisons of concepts, ideas, theories, findings, and analysis; (b) examination of implications of my findings for practice, current events, and theoretical orientation; (c) speculations of assumptions my audience may have; (d) strategized how to interpret to audience what I have come to understand; (e) told the story, if there is an incident from the research that captures a major insight or understand derived from my work; (f) creatively thought about where and how to tell the story and how it related to theory, my findings, and so forth; and (g) worked on writing a clear paragraph summarizing what I wanted to tell readers. Other critical data interpretation strategies included: (a) review of the data to identify themes; (b) written analytic memos for each theme while identifying its spatiotemporal characteristics; (c) study of documents for interpretation of the themes; and (d) summarized findings (Hatch, 2002).

Data Organization

The autoethnography was structured mostly as a chronological evocative narrative of my

experiences as a Black female charter school leader during three key epochs of this 17-year

experience, from 1999-2016. The three key epochs are: (a) School Start-Up & Opening; (b)

School Operations and Performance; and (c) School Closing (see Table 1 below). The

storytelling within these three key time periods in my formation as a school leader, starting,

operating, and closing a charter school consisted of episodic descriptions of events that shed light

on the ways in which the social and material inequalities impact leaders of color in today's

society. I used timelines and themes within each of the aforementioned epochs of my experience

to allow the reader to properly capture the spatiotemporal situation of the narrative and prove an

arch for me to frame my storytelling. The thematic structure of the data in one time period

informed the events presented in a subsequent period, thus creating a fluid and consistent

storyline.

Table 1

Data Design Epochs of Experiences

Epoch	Description
One	School Start-Up & Opening
Two	School Operations & Performance
Two – Part 1	Years Two-Four-2001–2004 Location: Capitol Children's Museum
Two – Part 2	Years Five to Six – 2004–2006 Location: The Hamer School
Two – Part 3	Years 6-15 (2006–2015), Location: 18th Place, Northeast
Three	School Closing

Analysis of the Data

Autobiographical data was treated with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect any cultural undertones of what was recalled and observed. I wrote retroactively about past occurrences and experiences that were not planned events for the purpose of this autoethnography (Denzin, 2010; Merriam, 2009). My experiences and life events were instead compiled and presented using hindsight because of their relevance to the overall themes of social justice and leadership for women of color and the connection of these experiences to the questions that inform this study. Some events discussed are presented in the form of a reflection.

My narrative combines the chronologic presentation of autobiographical data with the analysis of its implications toward the understanding of sociopolitical issues. I employed a thematic analysis of narrative and documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through this process, I treated stories contained in my personal narrative and official and pop culture documents as data, and used analysis to arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or across stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The search for themes within the data makes my personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging (Merriam, 2009). Photographs were selected to highlight personal epochs. Data were coded using an open coding method, as this unrestricted coding of data (Strauss, 1987) offered me the freedom to begin with broad emergent themes and transition to more specified themes. Straus maintained that the effectiveness of open coding is grounded in that data on the page as well as the conjunctive experiential data. I transitioned from the open coding phase to axial coding, a strategy in which categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Chang (2007) suggested that the autoethnographic researcher continually goes back and forth between collecting and analyzing data and interpreting results. Chang provided

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the following 10 strategies for use by autoethnographers to remain grounded in culture: (a) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (b) look for cultural themes; (c) identify exceptional occurrences; (d) analyze inclusion and omission; (e) connect the present with the past; (f) analyze relationship between self and others; (g) compare yourself to other people's cases; (h) conceptualize broadly; (i) compare yourself with social science constructs and ideas; and (j) frame with theories.

The analysis of research was undergirded by my subjectivity and dedication to scholarship. My analysis of research results were subject to my lived experiences. As I wrote up my analysis, I was mindful of the effectiveness of description, power of the interpretation, and conclusion (Wolcott, 2001). The critical analysis of the data is grounded in the following strategies: (a) review of published studies related to this research for comparisons of concepts, ideas, theories, findings and analysis; (b) examination of implication of my findings for practice, current events and theoretical orientation; (c) speculation of assumptions my audience may have; strategizing how to interpret to audience what I have come to understand; (d) telling of the story, if there is an incident from the research that captures a major insight or understanding derived from my work, creatively think about where and how to tell the story and how it related to theory, my findings, and so forth; and (e) writing a clear paragraph summarizing what I want to share with readers (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007). Other critical data interpretation strategies included: (a) review of the data to identify themes; (b) writing of analytic memos for each theme while identifying its spatiotemporal characteristics; (c) study of documents for analysis of the themes; and (d) summary of findings (Hatch, 2002). This collection of interpretations and themes was appropriately linked to the autoethnographic narrative and its connection to the literature

discussed in Chapter 2, from which implications and recommendations are contextualized and discussed at the end of Chapter 5.

Limitations

Chang (2007) suggested the following limitations of the autoethnography methodology: (a) excessive focus on self in isolation of others; (b) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (c) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (d) negligence of ethical standards related to others in self-narratives; and (e) inappropriate application of the label of autoethnography. Strauss (1987) suggested the use of open coding to provide the researcher the freedom to begin with broad emergent themes then migrate toward more specific themes. Strauss suggested that open coding is effective as it is both grounded in the data on the page as well as the conjunctive experiential data. To avoid suggested limitations, the following approaches are used: (a) autoethnographer reflects the interconnectivity of self and others; (b) stay focused on research purpose; (c) support arguments with broad-based data; (d) protect confidentiality of people in the story; (e) clearly define autoethnography; and (f) use systematic coding procedures.

I embraced the subjective nature of the autoethnography, as the method called for me to contribute wholly to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Ratner (2002) suggested that identifying our subjectivities enables us to strengthen our objective comprehension of the world. My goal for this research was to conduct a study that used my intellect, emotions, spiritual intuition, experiences, and personal reflection to provide an in-depth investigation of my experience as a Black female charter school founder and leader.

Delimitations

This study focused both on the ways in which social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a female charter school leader of color, and articulated lessons from experiences and obstacles I encountered on my journey as a female school leader of color. It is hoped that these topics of investigation contribute to aspiring school leaders of color and efforts of higher education to prepare educational leaders in a neoliberal education era.

Conclusion

The methodology framework of autoethnography was used to tell my story and was grounded in literature from Chapter 2. Chapter 4 tells the story organized around three epochs. Chapter 5 provides the analysis around the central themes that emerged and recommendations for future research and the field of education. Recommendations focus on Black female leaders in education and the importance of educating students of color.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The auto-ethnographic study described is the personal account of a Black female charter school leader who used an African-centered approach to providing educational and support services to Black students and their families in a charter school setting. The account reflects the self-analysis and self-reflection of a Black female leader within the social context of the research in the areas of African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership. The account presents three epochs: (a) School Start-Up and Opening; (b) School Operations and Performance; and (c) School Closing. The research and story may lend insight to those outside Black culture to attain perspective and understanding of hidden barriers that Black women continue to experience. The episodic descriptions of events are designed to shed light on ways in which social and material inequalities can impact Black leaders in today's society.

Epoch 1 – Start-Up

Sweet Inspiration

My love for my son, as a devoted mother responsible for his achievement, growth, and holistic well-being, blended with my commitment to children with high need, served as the catalyst for what became Paut Neteru Charter School. My son's first school experience was as an infant at an African-independent school in DC. My son attended Howard University Early Learning Programs (HUELP), from 2.5 years old until kindergarten. He attended kindergarten at an African-centered school that was a nontraditional DC public school. My son's father and I, as parents, loved the African-centered school for it was: (a) academically rigorous, (b) reflective of our African-centered values and lifestyle, (c) conducive to forging positive relationships with other holistic children and families, and (d) staffed by teachers and leaders who loved and were

committed to the holistic development of Black children. My son was happy there, as he continued some friendships from HUELP while forging new relationships with children and adults. The founder of the school had also been my teacher of African-centered education. As my son entered first grade, the African-centered school founded by my master teacher in African-centered education relocated then closed.

When the African-centered school closed, I enrolled my son into a charter school where he learned through the arts. His first-grade teacher was an architect. He learned academic subjects through building a landscape. While his math skills, including learning chess, survived the experience, his reading skills were not on grade level. At this same school where my son learned through the arts, there were organizational shortcomings that I, along with other parents, felt were not in the best interest of our children. We engaged in a series of meetings with the school's leadership, who expressed no intentions to integrate our concerns into their future plans for the school. I withdrew my son from the school upon the close of the school year, concerned about the school's lack of emphasis on reading and upon notification from school leadership that there would be no partnership with parents.

During the summer after he completed first grade, my son and I moved from Northwest DC, to a beautiful single-family home in Northeast DC. I enrolled him into second grade at a DC public school, two blocks from our home. He was placed with an experienced teacher very close to retirement. She was extremely firm, loving, and competent. She and I worked with my son to get his reading skills on grade level. I volunteered weekly in the classroom to support the teacher in her efforts to serve her students, even though I served as a senior executive for a nonprofit organization. My son's teacher appreciated the time I took to assist her, as she spent her entire day with the children.

I struggled with the reality that my son had already attended three different schools by the second grade. I questioned why I could not find a holistic school, like the African-centered school he attended that closed, where he could receive a rigorous education in a culturally-competent and holistic environment, where he would be experienced as a beautiful young child full of curiosity, regardless of skin color, hairstyle, economic status, and so forth. While his father was a clinical psychologist and I was a highly educated professional, I believed it was important that his school experience be public with children from all walks and paths.

In 1999, via a spiritual reading, I was encouraged to work on the shadow aspects of my personality to advance toward self-mastery and manifest my life purpose. I recall initially struggling with where to begin. I pursued professional and spiritual classes and, I believe, grew professionally and spiritually as a result. Within the next year, from spiritual growth and transformation, I moved to a beautiful new home, met my ex-husband, and started a new business.

Working at an Afrocentric firm and my relationship with my son's father ignited my reconnection with my African identity during the years 1988–1999. At the same time, my spiritual and community work revealed a readiness to expand the fulfillment of my life purpose beyond what I was presently doing as an administrator. I recall working in my office one day as a senior staff member of this Afrocentric firm and hearing an announcement on the radio soliciting the community to consider opening charter schools in DC. I rushed home for lunch and typed a preliminary interest form and submitted it that same day. I was moving, at this juncture, totally in the spirit, in the moment, obedient to and trusting whatever the universe dictated, while faithful and prepared for competent service.

I attended subsequent public community meetings where more detailed information was provided. I formed a community collaborative and began convening meetings. The Collaborative was comprised of friends and colleagues who were strong advocates for holistic success for Black children. As a collaborative, the decision was made to submit an application to open a charter school in one of the most high-poverty, underserved communities, East of the River/Southeast DC. The Collaborative collectively made key decisions about the school: (a) proposed names, (b) academic focus, (c) grades to be served, and (d) curriculum.

The charter application planning process included the following key steps: (a) attendance at chartering authority public meetings; (b) parent networking and brainstorming to identify educational interest and needs; (c) focus group discussions with parent, educators, advocates, and concerned community members to solicit involvement as founding members; (d) formation of the Collaborative; (e) strategic planning sessions to outline the basic concepts and framework for programming; (f) information interviews with seven existing charter schools; (g) regular attendance and active participation in workshops sponsored by the DC Resource Center; (h) drafting of mission and values statement; (i) development of information and briefing papers to distribute to prospective board members and partners; (j) weekly meetings of the collaborative to further outline and develop the school curricula and additional programming; (k) ongoing outreach to prospective board members, advisors and staff; preparation of the first draft of the application for external review; (l) ongoing revision and modification of the application; (m) establishment of interim board; and (n) development of draft by-laws and articles of incorporation. I moved through these process stages with immense focus and commitment. I felt the full support of the Collaborative and an accumulation of support and momentum from the community and chartering authority. The executive director of the chartering authority at that

time, in a quick study done on me days before the school opened in September 2000 by the Washington City Paper, described me as having been especially diligent. He described me, further, as having been assiduous about chasing things down, about figuring things out. He shared that he thought one of the reasons the board gave Paut Neteru a charter was because I and the people with whom I worked were so thorough.

I attended every workshop available for prospective charter school leaders (topics included staffing, facilities, charter financing, student recruitment and retention, etc.). It was at a workshop on charter financing that I met two current male charter school founders. The White male founder offered his assistance and alerted me that I would not have the same access to financing. He understood the dynamic of the philanthropic community and provided me with valuable authentic feedback. I wrote the charter application, balancing such writing with a demanding full-time position as an executive administrator and being a mother. I followed up on the offer of the White male leader that I had met at the financing workshop and he assisted me with developing the budget that I submitted with the initial charter application. Submission of the initial application resulted in conditional approval in 1999. I then enhanced the application to meet the conditions essential for charter approval. We were granted full approval in approximately January 2000 to open Fall 2000.

I provided my current supervisor 6 months' notice of my plans to resign from my position, given my executive position and out of respect for the organizational vision, and then worked part-time for another 6 months, as I set out to meet the varied and significant start-up requirements for the school. Moving in the spirit, I do not recall possessing any feelings of anxiety, fear, or doubt about resigning from the full-time executive position I had held for nearly 12 years.

Naming

I continued to keep the Collaborative actively engaged in the decision-making points for start-up of the school. Spiritually, I searched for three possible names for the school. I considered the proposed identity of the school, being African-centered, holistic, and family friendly, in arriving at three possible names. I presented three possible names for the school to the Collaborative, from which Paut Neteru was chosen. I do not recall the other two choices. Paut Neteru is an ancient Kemetan term that symbolizes one's journey toward self-mastery. Our philosophy was that children were born with all of the essential gifts for holistic success. We believed our role in education is to fulfill the literal definition of education, to "bring out" those gifts with which a child is born. We believed that children, regardless of ability or need, would feel the safety and belonging in a holistic school. We believed in our ability to activate the genius in every child with effective instruction and holistic support. We also believed that the name would bring a level of spiritual inspiration, to those who would become a part of the learning community.

Facility Search

My private home served as the school's first official office and address. My first two critical tasks were to secure a facility and hire key staff. Laura Lang (2000), writer of the quick study, describes the charter school-building effort as almost always frantic. I searched far and wide for a facility in the community we proposed to serve without success. DC Public Schools (DCPS) and the Chartering Authority were, at that time, differently interpreting language which mandated the availability of vacant public school buildings to charter schools. With vacant public schools inaccessible to new charter schools authorized by the charter school board, I had

to pursue space where landlords were currently renting to charter schools or commercial space that could be converted for school space.

I secured space owned by DC public schools and made available to charter schools. I was then, unofficially, directed by the charter school board executive director not to lease the space, given the current political positioning between DCPS and the Chartering Authority. (DCPS, and much of the DC political community was very anti-charter schools, even though DCPS served as a chartering authority.) The superintendent of DCPS was in a fierce battle with the Chartering Authority to prevent a DCPS junior high school from converting to a charter school. The junior high received its charter in 2000, the same year as Paut Neteru. My search for a facility, essentially, became a casualty of that battle. I obeyed the unofficial mandate and declined that space and set out to start, again, the pursuit of a facility.

Facilities were so scarce at the time, I had little choice (other than waiting to open the following year like two other schools) than to pursue a space that an existing charter school was vacating. The space was the fifth floor of the Capital Children's Museum in Northeast DC, in the Capitol Hill community, just blocks from Union Station. The building had previously been a monastery and parts of it were designated historical landmarks. The design looked nothing like a school with low ceilings and many nooks and crannies. Occupying the space meant improvising creatively for recreational space, auditorium, cafeteria, and so forth. The space showed the wear and tear from its previous occupancy beyond what paint could camouflage. As an educator that loves the kind of creative learning that can take place for children at museums, I was excited about the impending access our children would have to the museum—from its science lab to the maze to the bubble room! The founding members had immense collective excitement about offering a holistic program to children as waiting to open was not an option—so we embraced

our future space, including walking five flights of stairs when the elevator broke down, which occurred often.

Recruiting Staff

Hiring staff was the next big task. A number of the members of the Collaborative agreed to serve as founding staff and/or trustees. My son's father, a clinical psychologist, would serve as a parent representative on the board of trustees, then subsequently as board chair in future years. Two other members of the Collaborative agreed to serve on the board, one was an entrepreneur with his own computer company, and the other was a senior administrator with a Howard University (HU) program. Another member agreed to serve both on the Board and as the school's first school psychologist. She also recruited an additional trustee. The HU administrator and school psychologist served as the incorporators on the school's original business documents. Another Collaborative member, a social worker, served as the school's parent/community resources coordinator. The board approved my recommendation that I serve as the school's first executive director and principal, with the aim of hiring a principal in year three. The board authorized me to complete all other hires.

Our first year of operations entailed service to 75 students, grades K–4, as approved by the charter school board. I hired an educational facilitator, four teachers, and two teacher assistants. I attended several job fairs hosted by the charter school board to assist schools in staff recruitment, in addition to exploring known talent in the African-centered and charter school communities. Staff ultimately hired had either worked previously at a charter school, were from HU, and/or were members of the African-centered education community. Two of four teachers were Black males affiliated with Pan-African institutions. Two teachers were Black females who were a part of the African-centered community with one teacher having served at the African-

centered school in DCPS. The educational facilitator was a community friend and experienced teacher and administrator from another charter school and DCPS.

The African-centered community at the time was comprised of a few African-independent schools that had been in the community since the 1970s, a few African-centered charter schools that were offspring of African-independent schools or started by African-centered professionals and/or institutions, and an African-centered school that existed as an out-of-bounds DCPS school. While an active member of the African-centered community, I was not as active in the Pan-African community or known, being an implant from Pittsburgh and having only begun working in the DC community in the 1990s. I was known in the African-centered community as one who had participated in African-centered study groups and travel, who provided rites of passage programs for girls and women, and who was a student of African-centered education. While I believe members of the Pan-African community respected me, the philosophy of accepting federal and state funds was not shared. Then and now, I respected the choice of African-independent schools and institutions to be self-determined and not beholden to entities that demand compromise of the tenets of the Pan-African ideology. I believed that creating a school within the public-school realm, through access to federal and state funds, would facilitate serving hundreds of students per year while paying staff competitive salaries to provide high-quality education and services to children.

My son attended the African-centered school that was part of DCPS. The school was unfortunately closed three years prior to our anticipated opening. The closing of this school left a void in the African-centered community. The founder schooled a number of educators in African-centered education, including myself, in addition to starting and operating a school. I attribute her example as an African-centered educational leader, along with Dr. Asa Hilliard, as

the exemplars from which our school could replicate, as an African-centered model within a family-friendly holistic community charter school environment. The key attributes of this African-centered Black female school leader were (a) vision, (b) competence, (c) creativity, courage, (e) endless love for African people and African children, specifically, (f) commitment to the preparation of teachers in African-centered education, and (g) commitment to and belief in the future of African children. DCPS recognized her talent and hired her to provide African-centered instruction to its teachers before she opened her school within DCPS.

Recruitment of Students and Families

With a facility and staff secured, I proceeded to focus on student recruitment. Marketing the school was no easy task in DC, where parents had a variety of charters schools from which to choose. Marketing was also not my expertise. I tapped into my creativity, technology skills, and resourcefulness, and set out to promote the school with the aim to recruit the students (and families) that we were targeting. We wanted to offer our programs and services to the poorest and neediest children of the District. We believed the lives of these children would be enriched and uplifted with receipt of quality African-centered instruction, clinical support, family support, and community-based programs and services.

Our charter included an enrollment strategy where we would open with 75 students, grades K to 4, then add a grade each year until we attained grades Pre-K through 6. We convened public meetings to provide information about our school. Review of an old brochure reveals that we publicized offering the following: (a) content-rich, culture-rich, technology-rich, child and relationship-focused curriculum designed to achieve higher academic performance; (b) extended day and exciting enrichment programs; (c) small-class environment with low teacher/student ratio; (d) family support and specialized programs; (e) character-building and behavior

modifications skills; and (f) opportunities for active parental involvement in one's child's success.

The first few public meetings produced few outcomes, given low or no attendance. As I peruse a Quick Study done on me by the Washington City Paper days before the school opened in September 2000, I can appreciate the enormous feats, like student recruitment, leading up to the start of school. Within a few weeks prior to school opening, our recruitment efforts had gone from zero students to a waiting list of families desirous of enrolling in our school. I employed the following strategies that proved successful in student recruitment: (a) frequent public meetings at our school and in the community, (b) posting flyers in the community, (c) community partnerships, and (d) radio ads.

The most successful strategy for recruitment, however, was word of mouth—the sharing about the school from parents who had attended public meetings and enrolled their students. Word of mouth, an informal style of response, as the primary communication preference of choice by parents during this enrollment process, was an introduction to what would prove to be our parents' preferred style of communication for over 15 years. Womanists, Walker (1983) believed, should emphasize the primacy of a supportive social network of women, family, and community. Maybe our school provided a safe space for informal networks of support to exist.

We really needed parents to adhere to date sensitive decision points pertinent to enrollment. Relying on parents, who wait until the last minute to respond via word of mouth, significantly sabotaged my extremely organized investment in advanced planning to meet targets for enrollment, budgeting, teacher and staff hires, and furniture and materials. It was challenging to fulfill these tasks when I did not know until days before school opened what and how many students would attend school.

While my passion and commitment were to serve students (and their families) with high need, I understood early on the important role that student recruitment and retention played in the fiscal viability of a charter school, even if I was not aware at the time that students treated as commodities was the result of neoliberalism. The heavy burden of student recruitment to meet our fiscal aims detracted from some of the fun of engaging new families. Our cohort of founders and founding staff were so optimistic about the way in which our mission would positively serve Black children in DC (and their families). I facilitated most of the public meetings and believed in every statement and pledge to parents that I made. As I refer back to old PowerPoint presentations from enrollment public meetings, I shared our commitment to provide the following: (a) research-based, cooperative, collaborative teaching and out-of-classroom experiences; (b) family-strengthening services; (c) psychological support services; (d) parenting workshops; (e) parent resource center; (f) enrichment activities; and (g) family literacy activities. I stressed parent involvement as essential to overall school success, and invited parent participation in the following, toward meeting the 30-hour volunteer requirement: (a) school advisory council, (b) parent association and committees, (c) parent resource center, (d) school performance evaluation, (e) board of trustees, and (f) active support of student learning.

School staff would begin each meeting with a unity circle, an African-centered ritual designed to bond the group toward a common aim. We would also sing songs that would become a part of our daily and weekly school-wide and class openings and closings. We believed it to be important that parents experience what their children would experience daily. There were parents, then, that were not sure about the African-centered focus and rituals, even though their children responded favorably. We would progress through a series of songs and pledges, starting with the Negro National Anthem. The lyrics to the songs and pledges were African-centered and

designed to uplift the school community. Some parents were not as comfortable with pro-Black lyrics initially. I remember that parents, regardless of their capacity to demonstrate with consistency, showed immense love and hope for their children, and how the school would serve their children.

Enrollment

There were different stages of our enrollment process. The first stage was attendance at a public meeting. The second phase was for the parent(s) and child to attend an interview. The purpose of the interview was twofold: to ensure the school was a good fit for the family; and ensure the parent(s) understood the school's expectations of them. We expected each family to volunteer at least 30 hours per year. We required our parents to sign a commitment form that this pledge of voluntarism would be fulfilled. As a public school, we could not deny entry to any child living in the District. There were circumstances, however, when I advised parents to consider other schools as their interests and/or needs were not consistent with what we offered in terms of curriculum, foreign languages, specialized programs and services, and so forth. The third phase was forms day, when parents had to complete the multitude of forms required for public enrollment in all DC schools. Forms day also provided parents with the opportunity to register their students for enrichment or out-of-school time (OST) activities and other specialized programs and meet the teachers and staff.

Other Tasks

Concurrent with recruitment, we also focused significant energy ensuring curricular texts and materials were ordered. The educational facilitator, supervised by the principal, performed this task. The reading and math curricular programs had been approved by the Collaborative as part of the charter application submission. Success for All (SFA) and Everyday Mathematics

(EM) were chosen. SFA was chosen for its performance-based learning features. EM was a highly rated and popular math program. I searched for comprehensive African-centered programs and found none in 1999. We selected a science program designed by an African-independent school in the District.

Our first classroom and school furniture were mostly used and/or DCPS surplus. The year or two prior to our opening, charter schools in the District faced late per pupil allocation payments, causing delays and some shut-downs in services. We were hoping and praying the payments from DC government would be on time as we prepared to open, and our prayers were answered. Unsure of what the pattern of payment would be, however, we chose to spend in a frugal fashion.

Food services entailed choosing a caterer (as there was not a kitchen in our facility) and ensuring cafeteria and cafeteria staff met the federal guidelines for the national food and lunch programs. I have been a vegetarian since I was about 28 years old. I believe that the access of healthy food is a social inequality and still a serious challenge in high-poverty communities. It was critical to me that the caterer chosen would provide fresh healthy food versus heavily processed food commonly provided by public schools back then and still now. I chose a caterer that accommodated vegetarian diets. In our first year, numerous families lived healthy lifestyles. We were committed to not serving beef or pork. The caterer chosen would provide fresh healthy meals with chicken, fish, or a vegetarian option.

As an Afrocentric school, we wanted our school uniforms to reflect African culture. I, personally, have never preferred uniforms. Parents were empowered to decide whether the school would be a "uniform" school, given the provision of clothing children for school is the responsibility of parents. Parents voted for uniforms. We provided parents the option of

purchasing vests made of African fabric to augment the regular uniforms of students. One of our founding parents made the vests. The vests were distributed to families in time for the first day of school.

Revisiting the Quick Study from the Washington City Paper, I was reminded that I navigated the start-up of this community public charter school with a broken wrist. I was working from home, the school's first office, on school start-up tasks. I heard a loud noise and rushed to the basement to discover frozen burst pipes. I broke my wrist in the process of trying to stop the vicious flow of water bursting from numerous sources at the same time. This was the first injury I experienced in my life. One might deem it tragically poetic that I broke my wrist at the opening of the school and broke my neck in 2014, the last operating school year prior to the Charter Authority's decision to not renew the school's charter.

Facility Readiness

Facility readiness for occupancy was a huge task to master, given the condition of the facility we were occupying. Space that had previously served as sleeping quarters for a residential charter school would require transformation to a classroom setting. The chartering authority conducted a site visit a few days prior to the first day of school to ensure the school's readiness to open. With my application of constant pressure on the Museum to ready the space for occupancy, the chartering authority staff granted approval to open. The elevator stopped operating several times in the final days leading up to opening day, resulting in parents, students, and staff walking five flights of stairs for the final parents' meeting and final move-in tasks. We were all set and excited to see a dream, to offer holistic services to our community, manifest with the opening of our doors on the first day of school. Such excitement was shared by the founding Collaborative members, trustees, staff, and my son and me.

First Day of School

I do not remember much from the first day of school. I do recall the elevator successfully operating on opening day, while experiencing the following hiccups: (a) the caterer was hours late with lunch, and (b) a kindergarten student was not picked up on time. After working to ensure the selection of a caterer that would provide healthy meals to our children, I possibly should have checked the caterer's on-time delivery record. We served the students an alternative meal, like pizza or something. I do recall not continuing with the same caterer after the first year of delicious and nutritious meals, yet numerous glitches and late deliveries.

A kindergarten student was not picked up on time on the first day of school. We contacted everyone on the emergency contact list to no avail. My son provided the primary care of the young student, keeping him preoccupied so he would not feel abandoned or traumatized in any way, given we were complete strangers to him. Late into that evening the student's grandmother responded, as we continued to be unable to reach the student's mother, and my son and I drove the student to the home of his grandmother. Exhaustion probably outweighed excitement for my son and me upon the close of the first day of school at Paut Neteru. I am sure we were grateful for the wonderful interactions and experiences, notwithstanding the late arrival of lunch and one student not being retrieved.

Professional Development for the Founder

While acclimating to my service as executive director and principal of a new charter school, I was approached to join a cohort of charter leaders to enter a doctoral program in education administration at George Washington University. While grateful for the combined skill set I brought from previous matriculation in the areas of education and public administration, I recall feeling compelled to enter the program as a means to enhance my ability to better serve the

school and its families. As executive director, my degree in public administration was being used to the maximum, starting this new public entity. My educational experience as a teacher and resource specialist ended in 1984, and I had not received training in educational administration. While many charter founders and some charter school administrators were not credentialed administrators, I believed it to be critical that our students and their families experience the best school possible, and that vision called for effective leadership with accompanying credentials.

My enrollment in graduate school meant that my precious son was being shifted yet again, to be babysat by one of the school's teacher assistants at her home, as I attended classes two evenings per week. My son, as I studied at GWU, forged a special relationship with a loving and amazing caretaker, so he benefited from his sacrifice of mother and time. I was very committed to my roles as mother and school leader. I remember just wanting to be the best that I could be for others—my son and community. Both roles, I believed, were my life purpose and key to my experiencing the lessons and opportunities that would lead to the services of Paut Neteru or self-mastery for me.

Black Woman Leadership – The Monroe Doctrine

I applied for and was awarded a grant during the school's first year for our school to participate in Dr. Monroe's Leadership Program. Our school was the only first-year school participating. Teachers and leaders attended staff development with other participating schools. The program was designed to ensure uniformity in learning readiness routines. Each teacher used a Blackboard Configuration Chart (BBC) to display for students and instructional observers: (a) Do Now (Warm-up); (b) AIM (objective); (c) Lesson Steps; (d) Homework; and (e) Assessment. We implemented the program as part of our first-year instructional program. I used the BBC as a framework for meetings and trainings I convened with staff and parents.

Dr. Lorraine Monroe, program founder, visited our school in the early months of its operation. She and I conducted a walkthrough of each of the four classrooms. In our post-observation conference, Dr. Monroe revealed to me, in a brutally direct and authentic manner, her rating of the level of effectiveness of the four teachers. I'll never forget her sharing that a particular teacher was ineffective and referenced that the teacher was "killing the children" and strongly encouraged me to get rid of him/her. I recall feeling traumatized by the finality of her comments, considering we were just a few months into our first year and my instructional relationship with the teachers was brand new. In years, shortly thereafter, I understood fully the urgency and finality of her insights.

Varying Philosophies on Corporal Punishment Challenge the School's Relationship with African-Centered Community

One day, in year one of the school, I was sitting in my office as principal. The principal's office had two doors. The first door was to the left of the elevator, at the front entrance of the school. The second door was located in a hallway across from the boys' bathroom. I saw a student from my son's class walk by rubbing his bottom. I investigated and with considerable prodding learned that my son's third-grade teacher, had been paddling students with several yardsticks attached together. The punitive instrument of taped yardsticks even had a name. While use of corporal punishment was not an anomaly in some African-independent schools, it was under no circumstances permitted or encouraged at our school. One of my two mentors in the area of African-centered education, the founder of the African-centered school, was a strong advocate against corporal punishment. My personal philosophy as educator and mother was to implement positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) to youth within a strength-based framework.

I terminated the teacher for use of corporal punishment. In addition to my son and his classmates being upset with me, members of the African-centered community rose in an uproar. A university professor led the protest against the teacher's firing. I met with the professor, the teacher, and the teacher's parents (the teacher had grown up and was well-known in the Pan-African community.) While I upheld my decision, the decision created disharmony in our school community and between me and the African-centered community. The teacher and I have been on excellent terms for some years. The same teacher, in later years, married and enrolled his children in our school. At the time when this incident occurred, my philosophy on child development in general, and behavior management specifically, along with my positioning within the African-centered community, was being tested. I was willing to be unpopular with the African-centered community to ensure the fair treatment of children and compliance with school and District policy.

The clash of philosophies on student discipline persisted throughout the history of the school. The clash of ideas challenged beliefs on corporal punishment, a female administrator disciplining a male teacher, and Pan-African versus mainstream public student discipline policies. I also wonder if the Pan-African community and the Black male college professor would have approached a Black male administrator with the same anger and conviction directed toward me, a Black female administrator.

Student and School Performance – Year 1

Our goal had been to recruit and serve at-risk students. We believed that our African-centered approach, performance-based learning, and teachers with high expectations would have a positive effect on student achievement and growth for high need students. The scores below in

Table 2 show the promise of our approach to schooling and educating Black children in the first years of the school.

Paut Neteru students took the Stanford 9 test in April 2001. These results served as a baseline data. By year two, April 2002 data showed the percentage of students with positive gain in reading was 88% and math was 53%. In terms of progress in performance levels, 72% of students were at basic or above in reading and 75% were at basic or above in math.

Table 2

Student Academic Performance – Year 1

Grade	Below Basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Reading				
First	35.7%	64.3%	0%	0%
Second	64.3%	35.7%	0%	0%
Third	41.2%	47.1%	11.8%	0%
Math				
First	31.3%	50.0%	18.8%	0%
Second	41.7%	50.0%	8.3%	0%
Third	41.2%	29.4%	23.5%	5.9

Epoch 2 – School Operations and Performance

Part 1 – Years 2 to 4 (2001-2004), Location: Capitol Children's Museum

9-11. With our school located on Capitol Hill, just minutes from the White House, staff and students were prohibited from leaving the school building on 9-11 for hours after the three planes crashed, including the crash at the Pentagon. I do not recall much from this day. I just remember unspoken grief among the adult staff and parents in a terrified state of panic. I do recall one parent withdrawing her daughter the same day and leaving the DC area, and how the DC community mourned a DC student who was killed in the crash.

The ultimate loss – twofold. We took a family trip to Ghana in August 2001. My ex-husband trained there previously to be a traditional African priest. We chose to travel as a family, including my mother-in-law, son, and ex-husband. While there, my ex-husband's spiritual godfather predicted that I would become pregnant. Within months, by February 2002, the spiritual godfather's premonition manifested. My ex-husband, whom I had not yet married, had surprised me with a birthday party. I announced the pregnancy to my friends at the surprise gathering.

During Year 2 of my doctoral program, members of our cohort were approached to take additional classes on Saturday to secure the DC administrative credential. I participated in the program for the same reason that I entered the doctoral program—in search of excellence to better serve my students and families. On the Saturday following my 46th birthday while in class, I discovered that my pregnancy might be at risk. I miscarried. I would learn later that the Friday night before I miscarried, two of my students died in a fire. My loved ones decided to withhold the tragic news about the children as I faced my own loss. I took these events and the synchronization of these events extremely hard, yet I continued to work as I moved through the grieving process. I do not believe it was an accident that I began miscarrying while attending a Saturday class for my doctoral program. I share this experience to make a connection between my professional quest to provide exemplary leadership to the school and how this quest intersected with and sometime compromised my personal dreams like having more children or a more balanced life.

It was my responsibility to direct the school's grieving process, having just lost two students in year two of the school's existence. We ensured the availability of counseling for our students and maintained an ongoing relationship with the mother of the children, including

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offering her counseling services. Since I miscarried just days from publicizing the pregnancy, we did not acknowledge or publicize my loss within the school community. As I reflect back to that time, I recall and can still now almost feel the stress I was under as a new charter school leader, mother, and student. If I had a choice, I would have undoubtedly chosen to culminate a healthy pregnancy with a healthy baby over the charter school or graduate school. Instead I accepted and moved through the valley the universe placed me in to learn lessons for the future. The lesson that I was not superwoman, that this experience offered, however, was not learned until 2014 when I broke my neck, was partially paralyzed, and almost died.

The ultimate tests of survival – facilities and leadership. At the close of school year in late May 2003–2004, our landlord, the Capitol Children's Museum, provided the school with a 30-day notice to vacate, given their impending sale of the entire building. Securing and retaining facilities is, likely, the most challenging feat for charter schools. While I had been leading our board through the process of exploring the feasibility of facilities financing, we had not yet secured such financing. We had recently received approval to increase our enrollment from 150 to eventually 540, as a means to secure facility financing. Prospective facilities funding sources insisted that our enrollment size of 150 students would not generate enough capital for their support of facility financing. I faced head-on the most challenging task yet experienced—to secure a facility within 30 days to relocate the school.

Relations between DCPS and the Charter School Board were still strained pertinent to the availability of surplus DCPS facilities to charter schools. I began conversations with DCPS officials to negotiate for space in one of their surplus facilities. Concurrently, I secured an agent to search for commercial property adequate for the school's needs. The Charter School Board supported my efforts to secure space in a DCPS facility. Upon numerous meetings with DCPS

and layers of bureaucracy, I was able to secure space at Hamer (a DCPS public school building). Hamer is a pseudonym. A DCPS elementary school had occupied it during the school year coming to a close, while their school received renovations. The facility had serious HVAC issues and was roach and rat infested. Half of the student bathrooms lacked running water. I knew about the HVAC issues. I learned later about the pest infestations. I, again, faced the crossroad to accept an inferior facility or close the school, as time to secure a facility had expired.

Concurrent with receipt of the 30-day notice to vacate, I was beginning the search for a new principal for the school upon receipt of board approval to do so. My first choice was seen as a rising graduate of the new leaders for new schools program. The new leaders for new schools program served as a training ground for aspiring principals and administrators. When my first-choice candidate accepted another position, I selected my second choice, who I believed would be a good fit for our school.

The new principal started immediately and won the hearts of teachers and staff quickly. While attending a public hearing hosted by the DC Council, I shared who I had hired as principal with another charter school founder. She shared that she had interviewed him also and that he was not who he said he was. I returned to the office and commenced my own investigation into his past, including visiting in-person DCPS personnel and the state credentialing offices. The newly hired principal had falsified his resume and credentials. I received the board's approval to terminate him and the staff was immediately in an uproar. I was unpopular for the former principal (who was very popular) not returning and the new principal, who was already popular, being terminated. I took very seriously my responsibility to ensure the school provided leadership that effectively navigated the academic and holistic needs of our students. Weeks later, when going back to the new leaders for new schools program, all candidates had been

placed except two. Under pressure to begin school with a principal in place, I hired one of the two remaining principal training program graduates. My hope was that she would fulfill the promise of her training program and effectively serve the students and teachers of our school.

Charter amendment – adding Grades 7 and 8. Our original charter authorized us to provide schooling for students in grades Pre-K to 6. In 2003, one of our trustees invested in the future of the school and our students had strong concerns about where our students would go after grade 6. Concurrent with his concerns, parents of fifth- and sixth-grade students expressed interest in the school adding grades. Parent and staff survey results revealed parent support to add grades, but not staff support. An old copy of the survey results that I perused, distributed to parents and staff in December 2003, revealed the following results when asked if the school should add grades 7 and 8: (a) parents (66 parents responded yes and 23 parents responded no), and (b) staff (5 responded no). Staff who said no believed that Paut Neteru had not yet achieved the level of effectiveness in academic and nonacademic program and services, and the resources required to integrate a middle school component would adversely impact the school's capacity to reach a high level of effectiveness for its current grades. Staff, further, encouraged the school to focus on attaining its accreditation and managing the behavioral issues of existing children.

The board of trustees voted to add grades 7 and 8. I submitted and the school received approval of its charter amendment to add grades 7 and 8. Parents were also asked, on the same survey, if they were in favor of gender-specific grouping. We had proposed gender-specific instruction in our initial charter application. The charter school board advised us that their attorneys advised them that gender-specific groups were discriminatory and forbade it. Other schools, in future years, provided gender-specific instruction and all-girls' and all-boys' schools. We surveyed our stakeholders to ascertain favor to the idea of gender-specific grouping and

received the following results: (a) parents (34 responded yes, 44 responded no); and (b) staff (4 responded no). We did not pursue gender-specific instruction any further.

Curriculum, standards, and high-stakes testing. I wrote the school's initial curriculum as part of meeting the charter application requirements. We chose SFA and EM, as the core text programs to anchor our core instructional program. Our teachers never really liked the spiraling effect of EM. Staff had mixed reviews on the effectiveness of the SFA program. SFA was performance-based and students were grouped for reading based upon performance level versus grade level. In 2003 or 2004, the principal and instructional facilitator presented a united front in support of changing reading programs. We did not change the reading program at the time of their strong advocacy, as staff survey results favored continuing with SFA. SFA was replaced with Open Court Reading (OCR) program in later years, as part of our Reading First (RFA) grant, upon securing approval from the chartering authority.

We adopted, as part of our charter application, the District of Columbia Public Schools English Language Arts and History and Math Content Standards. I also wrote nonacademic standards, as part of the charter application, pertaining to the students developing positive self-esteem and demonstrating African-centered principles such as cooperative work and play. As part of NCLB legislation passed in 2002, schools receiving federal funds were subjected to meeting performance standards as measured by high stakes testing. I attended a training sponsored by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) for local education agency (LEA) superintendents on how the new Common Core standards would be rolled out in the state. OSSE, however, did not complete the trainings, after providing just one of what was to have been a training series. Upon learning that the state would not be completing the implementation training, I hired the same consultants used by the state to provide training for our

teachers and leaders a year prior to when the implementation of Common Core standards became a mandate. Subsequently, I led the rewriting of the school's entire curriculum to align with the Common Core standards. I formed a team of writers including highly effective teachers and the instructional leadership team. It took us over a year to rewrite the curriculum and full implementation had not been realized when the school closed in 2015.

The District of Columbia State Office of Education, in its quest to select a high stakes test to match the Common Core standards, switched from using the Stanford-9 Assessment to DC-CAS. I secured a contract with an organization called Achievement Network for ongoing training and leadership development essential to prepare teachers to prepare students for the DC-CAS. This contract also included interim assessments, designed to predict student mastery of standards and readiness for the state test.

Student and school performance – Years 2 to 4. Prior to enforcement of the performance management framework (PMF), schools reported student performance data as part of completing an annual accountability plan. The accountability plan included goals in the performance areas of academics, nonacademics, student nonacademics, and organizational and management performance. Data in Table 3 indicate a decline in reading and math performance from Years 2 to 3 and improvement from Years 3 to 4. The table shows hard work and progress made in the early years of the school. Epoch 2 illustrates how achieving student academic achievement and growth increased in difficulty.

Table 3

Student Academic Performance – Years 1 to 4 (2000-2004)

Performance Goal	Baseline Data (Year 1 Performance) 2000-2001	Annual Target	5-Year Target	Year 2 Performance 2001-2002	Year 3 Performance 2002-2003	Year 4 Performance 2003-2004
Students will attain literacy	43.4	At least 50% of students taking SAT-9 will show positive gain	At least 60% of students taking SAT-9 will show positive gain	88%	43%	66.7%
Students will learn basic math skills	37.9	At least 50% of students taking SAT-9 will show positive gain	At least 60% of students taking SAT-9 will show positive gain	53%	21%	66.7%
Students will achieve Goals 2000 and DCPS Goals 2000 content and performance standards	100%	Each year, at least 85% of third-graders will achieve grade-level content and performance standards	Ninety percent of all students at grades 3 and 6 intervals will achieve grade-level content and performance standards	85%	86%	100%
	100% (2001-2002)	Each year, at least 90% of third-graders who completed second grade @ TOL will achieve third-grade-level content and performance standards	Ninety-five percent of students will start in kindergarten and remain through grade 3 and second-graders will remain through grade 6	100%	100%	100%

Epoch 2

Part 2 – Years 5 to 6 (2004–2006), Location: The Hamer School

  Facility moves heighten student recruitment task. Each facility move the school experienced required student recruitment efforts beyond the routine re-enrollment process. Receipt of only a 30-day notice to relocate the school placed us at a disadvantage to: (a) retain our students of parents for whom our location was priority; and (b) recruit new students of parents having begun the school selection process. We worked to retain our existing families by doing the following: (a) committed to relocating within 5 miles of the current location, to which we provided bus transportation; and (b) surveyed parents to ascertain the number of parents that would remain with the school, notwithstanding the impending move. The survey results revealed that a good portion of our parents were not willing to relocate. We, as a result of the survey results, modified our enrollment process for the coming year already underway for our returning families to include a recruitment effort as if we were opening the school for the first time. We attained our enrollment target for the coming school year. The move from one location to the other, however, impacted our student retention data and ultimately student achievement and growth data, having lost students in whom years of instruction were invested.

  I continued to search for facilities after moving into our first location at the Capital Children's Museum. Along with volunteer trustees, I visited several DCPS buildings. The DCPS buildings were either in major disrepair or were not politically available as a result of battles. I discovered years after inspecting an asbestos-filled DCPS building that our architects advised against spending millions in asbestos abatement and that the same building was rented to a school founded by a young White male law student for a very minimal monthly amount. An almost free lease left funds to abate the asbestos and renovate the facility. The option of a low-

cost lease was never offered to us. I did not even know such an arrangement was possible. I wondered if my not receiving the same opportunity was a result of my race and/or gender and/or political positionality, as an African-centered school. The facility was located east of the river where we initially proposed to locate the school directly across the street from the Metro.

Move to the Hamer School. We moved to the Hamer School, a DCPS site, with our founding third-grade students entering the seventh grade. While the new principal worked to ensure the academic program would be ready for full implementation on the first day of school, I continued to work with DCPS to remedy the significant health and safety issues. The temperature in the front office was over 100 degrees with no AC. My office was located around the hall from the front office and across the hall from one of the bathrooms with no running water for handwashing. The Charter Board approved our opening with the expectation that DCPS would remedy the issues prior to or soon after the first day of school. The HVAC issues improved over the coming weeks after opening. The unrevealed infestations persisted for our entire stay at the facility.

The principal, while navigating school start-up tasks, failed to succeed in forging positive relationships with teachers. Within weeks of starting in her position, several teachers and staff under her supervision resigned, including an amazingly effective first-grade teacher. I was not able to convince staff to stay. When investigating the reason for abrupt resignations, each staff would relay that the principal was not truthful. I never succeeded in unwrapping exactly what was occurring between the administrator and the staff she supervised. She consistently and effectively monitored instruction and provided regular feedback to teachers. Her ability to promote good instruction was a priority skill that I sought in a principal. The new principal continued in her capacity through the end of that school year. For the following year, a new

principal was hired from the same program. He would start the year that the school moved to its new facility midyear.

Navigating these leadership transitions tested my leadership skills. Recruiting and retaining an administrator that effectively drove instruction and motivated and monitored effective teaching was an elusive task for me. My focus on students inspired me to make difficult decisions in the best interest of the community. There were numerous times that I would have liked to have terminated teachers or leaders that I believed were impeding student progress, but I did not take action, understanding that the absences of key staff would be just as harmful or more harmful to students and/or the school climate. There were instances where I implemented corrective action plans for marginal staff and/or increased the burden of service on high performing staff for the sake of the children. Two issues that persisted through the life of the school were personnel challenges and transitions in leadership.

A stalker – a PR nightmare. DCPS failed to inform the school that an additional school using the second floor of Hamer, the school facility that we occupied, provided a program for special needs students up to age 20. Our students and staff did not use the second floor for any purposes. The neighboring school was not to use the first floor for any purposes. Each school had its own egress, and our students never cohabited.

One of the male students from the neighboring school upstairs entered a first-floor bathroom and took one of our first-grade students upstairs. Our student's teacher brought the child to the office to report the incident. We contacted the parents. We interviewed the child in front of her parents. The child reported that the student took her by the hand and walked her to the second floor and nothing further had occurred. She did not appear harmed or upset. By the next day, our student's parents alleged that their female child had been touched inappropriately

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by the much older male student. The story was covered on all local news channels, providing first a picture of one of our school busses. Our student's parents, after much controversy, eventually withdrew any intentions to file charges against the school for failing to protect their child.

While our student got permission to use the bathroom just across the hall from her classroom, retrieved a hall pass, and went to use the bathroom without expectation of intrusion, I believe the incident and her safety was the school's responsibility. I was extremely grateful that the school was spared from what could have been, in addition to a public nightmare, a school operations nightmare. I vaguely recall establishing a closer relationship with the administrators of the neighboring school, devoting more training to teachers on student safety protocol, and increasing hallway security. I ensured that our parents were aware of the incident and our security protocols.

This incident adversely added to our identity as an African-centered school. The incident placed our school in the public eye, via the local television news coverage. Choosing to remain open by occupying what we learned through this incident to be an unsafe facility positioned our school to be seen as a place not safe for children. The provision of a safe haven for children was a key element of our identity as a family-friendly community school. The incident made the material inequities of the facilities crisis painfully real and heightened the urgency of our need for a permanent facility.

Sacred groundbreaking. As we trudged through the facilities and cohabitation woes that accompanied our short-term stay at Hamer, I continued to pursue financing for a facility, given the lease for this facility was short term. I applied for a $1,000,000 bond with a host of other schools. My application was one of five chosen. A young White female charter leader, having

just opened a charter school on Capitol Hill, shared that the senator heading the education committee assured her receipt of the grant, as it was critical to have available public-school options for Whites moving into DC. With this $1,000,000 bond, I was able to secure a facilities loan. I set out to identify a facility. There were less than five buildings available for purchase. We located a warehouse that housed a family-owned sign company. I facilitated the process of selecting a contractor for the design-build project to convert the warehouse to a school.

We celebrated the beginning of the build-out with a ground-breaking ceremony in April 2005. Members of the school and charter community were invited to attend. A priest opened the ceremony with libation. Libation is an ancient ritual practiced by many traditional communities to acknowledge the ancestors and pray for well-being for the community. Pouring libation is synonymous with a prayer, wish, or affirmation that includes recognition of family and community ancestors. Members of the community, students, and staff provided brief comments. It was a brief, yet beautiful community ritual.

Days after the ritual, I received a call or school visit from the chartering authority's executive director who was a Black female educator. She shared that she heard about the priest having poured libation and forbade it from occurring again. While explaining to her that the practice was synonymous with a prayer, I acquiesced to her wishes out of respect for who she was and her position. In the future, I chose to verbally acknowledge family and community ancestors and stopped short of the physical ritual that, in many traditions, would accompany it. I had attended numerous events at other charter schools and/or sponsored by the charter school board where a minister was asked to provide an opening prayer. Yet, the practice of pouring libation was seen as inappropriate for the school setting. Years later, as our last principal was

considering accepting our offer to serve our students as principal, charter board staff discouraged her, providing the reasons that we were Afrocentric and we practiced Voodoo.

Both incidents illustrated the ways in which Blacks have been mis-educated about African diasporic culture outside of their training and experience, and the benefits of Black children and families experiencing culturally-centered learning that provides an accurate picture of contributions to world history by non-White populations. Ancestral reverence is practiced faithfully in America, as prominently displayed by statues, dedications (buildings and streets named after ancestors), and through storytelling (via history books, etc.). The African concept of family includes the ancestors, elders, children, and the unborn. The Eurocentric concept of family, I would argue, fails to provide proper care to any of these elements of the African family as elders are placed in senior care away from family members, U.S. children are wrought in poverty including poor health and poor education, and the unborn child is fought over philosophically and politically.

At our school, we believed it to be important for students and families to tap into the gifts of their ancestors, while honoring elders, children, and the unborn. Byrd and Jangu (2009) explained that global capitalists exploit people of African descent by: (a) using education to encourage Black students to ignore or disparage native values, knowledge, customs, culture, and identity; and (b) using media to teach people of African descent to desire and emulate the unsustainable and environmentally destructive beliefs and life-styles of the West; and, as a result, (c) people of African descent are discredited and targeted through blatant and subtle media portrayals. Byrd and Jangu described, further, that educating people from an African-centered perspective emphasizes heritage through the veneration of ancestors, nature, and spirit in daily life, by attuning to and balancing with the rhythms of nature and spirit through individual and

group processes, education, rituals, and ceremonies. Maybe I missed an opportunity to expand the awareness of Black leadership and leadership in general of the chartering authority staff who were not aware of their own mis-education and closed-mindedness to non-Western practices.

An ancient discovery. We purchased the facility and commenced build-out. We encouraged the agency of our eighth-grade students as they met with the architects and chose the flooring and wall designs and colors for the school. The facility was slated to be ready for the start of the subsequent school year. The design-build team made a unique discovery. The basement of the 3-level building was determined to have an underground space of which the prior owners were unaware. The discovery of this space resulted in a 6-month delay in our occupancy and $150,000. When the builders opened the cave or space, there were items such as old soda bottles, and so forth. The district had to ensure there were no discoveries that required state protection like bones, or other items. We chose to celebrate the discovery by inviting students, families, staff, and community the opportunity to place personal items and messages in bottles before the cave was closed possibly for additional decades or scores.

School performance – fifth-year review. While a school is awarded a 15-year charter, reviews are conducted every 5 years. The school's most tumultuous year, 2004–2005, also served as the data performance year on which the fifth-year review would be conducted. In January 2006, the charter school board conducted a review of the school, finding that the school met the nonacademic and organizational standards in place at that time, but had not met the majority of its academic targets in its accountability plan, had not improved on a majority of these academic targets, nor scored within 80% of its SAT-9 achievement targets in its accountability. Based upon the referenced findings, the charter school board voted to continue

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the school's charter on the conditions that the school submitted: (a) a timeline for accreditation, (b) a master plan on student achievement, and (c) an inventory of all of the school's assets.

The first five years of operating the school came with many lessons in leadership. My efforts to lead an educational institution where students achieved high levels of achievement and growth had not yet been achieved. Academic achievement and growth were always the highest priority, overachieving nonacademic goals. Facility woes and leadership changes thwarted my commitment to student achievement and growth. I was determined to persevere beyond any obstacles impeding student academic achievement and growth. I would proceed forward to attain accreditation and completed the master plan for student achievement. I learned and accepted that possessing integrity outweighed being popular or accepted. I learned how difficult it is to be apolitical in an extremely political system such as the neoliberal educational system. I learned how hard it is to recruit and retain high quality teachers and leaders, and even harder to recruit staff who embrace an African-centered approach to education. I learned the challenges that accompany efforts to serve oppressed children and their families, including retaining families. It is challenging to move students academically when your student population is transient, as their families face the struggles of poverty and marginalization. Against the odds, and there were many, the school still existed. The school's survival of numerous seemingly insurmountable challenges reflects my resilience and fortitude against the odds. My goal, however, was for the school to thrive and perform at a high level for the sake of the children and community.

Epoch 2

Part 3 – Years 6 to 15 (2006 – 2015), Location: 18th Place, Northeast

Midyear move-in. We were excited to move into our own facility in 2006 (where we would remain until our closing 10 years later). Our facility included 20 state-of-the-art

classrooms, even though the architects were not able to carve out ample space for a gymnasium or formal auditorium. Our cafeteria was also used for assemblies and called the "cafetorium."

School performance – 10th-year review. At the time of the school's 10th-year review, in 2010, the chartering authority's practice was to conduct a preliminary charter review in the school's ninth year, so that the school could address any issues identified, and then conduct the charter review the following year. In February 2010, the chartering authority review of the school determined that the school had met its academic, organization, compliance, governance, and fiscal targets, and as such was not a candidate for charter warning. In February 2011, the chartering authority voted to fully continue the school's charter. The chartering authority noted at that time significant decrease in DC-CAS performance in both reading and math, and reenrollment rates were low.

I recall the hostile interrogatory style of one of the chartering authority's board members at the hearing. As our school's board chair and I faced the chartering authority's board, one of the authority's board directors, a young White female, delivered a very strong commentary against the continuing of our school's operations based upon what she perceived to be a history of poor performing students academically. She cast the sole vote against the school's continuance. At the very same hearing, we witnessed another school, an Afrocentric charter school with slightly better academic performance, yet challenging data in other areas of operations. As I examined the other school's data, I was surprised when the board voted to grant continuance of the school's charter. This hearing provided a snapshot of the politics of charter school accountability appraisal and authorization.

While I was encouraged by the school's improved performance and the chartering authority's vote of continuance, there were aspects of my being that agreed that our school

should have been performing more strongly by its 10th year. Even knowing that we had faced greater adversity than most schools with whom we were compared, we had made great strides with our students and families that statistics may not reflect. This Director did not have a clue of what it took to operate a high poverty school and overcome major challenges. I interpreted her attitude of one of the oppressor. This Director evaluated the school by a rubric, absent any awareness or sensitivity to the plight of the oppressed, imposed by the oppressor, and the challenges of those who serve the oppressed. I believe that I, as a Black female leader, in the midst of my mis-education, bought into the expectations of the oppressor, notwithstanding the social and material inequalities that had shaped my journey.

Staff buy-in to African-centered approach to education. Staff who believed, embraced, and implemented an African-centered approach to education were in the minority most of the later years of the school. The first complement of staff hired to start the school fully supported the ideals of African-centered education. As the school experienced a major shift driven by external forces, the importance of staff being willing to implement African-centered education lessened in priority. Shifts included: (a) high-stakes testing that accompanied NCLB legislation, (b) facility emergencies, (c) adding grades 7 and 8; (d) increasing enrollment to secure facility financing, and (e) mass recruiting efforts with each relocation. While other schools were stable and flourishing, we were fighting to withstand flurries of adversity from the forces of neoliberal education. I was open to hiring White teachers and interviewed several. Only one White teacher accepted our offer for a position. She reported to in-service training one day and did not return. I do not believe she was comfortable working in an environment where African-centered routines like singing the Negro Anthem were practiced. I was totally transparent with her and really thought she would be a good fit. She indicated that she had

worked with Black students before. I do not think she had worked in an Afrocentric school where Eurocentric culture was not dominant.

Leadership changes. In 2006, we moved into the new facility with the school's fourth principal completing his first year. He was a graduate of the same program as the previous principal and was very popular among staff. While a very charismatic leader and nice person, he failed to monitor instruction and manage the administrative duties of principal. He resigned after one year of service. The next principal may have been the most challenging to supervise and support. This principal also failed to value the importance of teacher development, including monitoring instruction and feedback provision, and ensuring effective implementation of instructional programs. This principal, the instructional facilitator, and dean of students would together neglect their collective duties of driving the instructional and student behavior programs. I assumed a hands-off approach to this principal's day-to-day operations, given my perceived reputation for being the cause of principal turnover and setting expectations too high for administrators. I focused on my duties as executive director and met with her regularly about the instructional programs at the school. She was not popular with teachers or students. She resigned after 1 year.

Facing the reality of the school hosting its fifth principal in 7 years, sixth if you count the principal who only worked a few weeks, upon discovery of his falsified credentials, I searched for other options. I learned that a fellow founder of a DC charter school, who also participated in the same GWU doctoral program, assumed duties as both executive director and principal after experiencing similar struggles with leadership recruitment and retention.

Our school design entailed my serving as executive director and principal for the first 2 years of the school only to establish a solid instructional framework. The educational facilitator

was hired with the hope that she would move into principal position after 2 years. We implemented this plan and she served as principal from 2002-2004, Years 3 and 4.

In 2008, I reluctantly, with the approval of the trustees, re-assumed duties as principal and hired an assistant principal. I sacrificed expanding aspects of the school mission and vision to serve as principal again, believing that stability in school leadership was critical. The school had less students and staff when I served as principal previously. Serving as both executive director and principal was extremely stressful and challenging, as I was committed to ensuring neither capacity would suffer as a result of my serving in the other.

While I supervised fewer teachers than the assistant principal, the middle academy teachers were the most transient and unwilling to consistently write lesson plans and perform other administrative duties. While I used a supervision model that focused more on feedback than supervision and engaged in regular team building activities with the team, this team was the most challenging to supervise, support, and coordinate by the instructional leadership team. Middle academy teachers faced greater challenges with off-task student behavior than teachers in the elementary grades. A dean of students provided full-time support to teachers, to facilitate teacher focus on effective instruction versus managing inappropriate behavior.

This leadership model proved to be effective and continued until the last 2 years of the school, 2013–2015, when I hired another principal with board consent. During the years I served as principal, the assistant principal administered instructional programs for grades Pre-K to 4, as I served grades 5 to 8. In the final 2 years of the school, the assistant principal administered programs for grades Pre-K to kindergarten. The principal administered programs for grades 1 to 8. The assistant principal had been a former principal with DCPS, but chose to serve as assistant principal and repeatedly declined my request that she consider being principal during the years I

was principal. She was always extremely effective as an administrator and was popular with teachers and students and respected by all.

The last principal performed the administrative duties of principal, in terms of monitoring instruction, yet was not as popular with teachers as her personality was introverted and she was withdrawn. I believe she had a sincere desire to serve the students and staff to the best of her ability. She was far stricter when it came to student discipline, wanting us to implement electronic security systems, etc. I tried to support her, even when our philosophies on teacher development, instruction, and/or behavior management differed.

The only principals who embraced African-centered education over the years were the principal who started as educational facilitator and the assistant principal. While recruiting and retaining effective school leaders was an ongoing challenge, consistent with the Africanist womanist approach, I merged together my experience as a Black female leader with my awareness of the needs of students, and their families and staff to facilitate leadership and action to provide an effective complement of staff (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Leadership lessons, for me included: (a) hiring—the importance of recruiting administrators that are willing to drive and monitor instruction, possess strong interpersonal skills and the initiative to actively engage teachers, parents and students, motivate teachers, ensure the provision of critical care to students, and lead beyond charisma; (b) training—ensuring administrator is committed to lifelong learning for teachers and leaders; and (c) support—ensure that administrator has sufficient support to succeed from me, as supervisor and others in and outside of the organization.

African woman leadership – capacity-building skills tested. On March 18, 2014, just days before students would take the state test that would determine the school's future, I experienced a life-altering injury. Digging myself out from a snow storm that exceeded 30 inches

in accumulation, I fainted and laid face down in the snow unconscious for over 3 hours. Fortunately, I awakened, yet I was paralyzed. A neighbor discovered me and summoned the ambulance. Within hours, I learned that I had a brain tumor and a broken neck. Weeks later, neurologists inferred that I had likely had the brain tumor since birth. After several weeks of hospitalization and months of rehabilitation, I regained most of my mobility. I convened regular meetings, via phone or at the hospital while hospitalized, with the chief financial officer and principal. Both Black female leaders ensured the continued instructional and business operations at the school where my professional absence was not felt. In addition to this life-altering experience increasing my gratitude and faith in creative forces, known by many names, the following awakenings are relevant to this sharing of personal experience: (a) acceptance—I was prepared to face and no longer feared whatever outcome the school would face, as being alive and not paralyzed would have highest importance over the school's prognosis; (b) mindfulness devote less time to the school and more time to living in the moment and cherishing relationships with family and friends; and (c) the school running just fine without me for weeks was a testament to my leadership and spiritual growth, in terms of detachment, and building capacity and empowering others to excel in their respective work. I received enormous love and support from the school community, spiritual community, African-centered community, and family and friends.

I am blessed to have always felt loved and never alone for my entire life. Had I not awakened, however, from hours of unconsciousness, I would have transitioned alone, as my son had just returned to college a few days prior and my remaining immediate family resided in California. This experience illustrated the tremendous level at which I am loved in DC. I remain grateful that an MRI conducted in 2017 revealed no evidence that my neck had ever been broken

in two places. I wonder if this life-altering miracle occurred solely for the purpose of preparing me for the devastating challenges and loss that I would face in the months ahead and fortified me to push forward with optimism and faith in the subsequent unknown future. I hope to facilitate infinite miracles in the future for high need, high poverty children and their families, if the universe determines that is what I am to do next. After this occurrence, I named myself the African Snow Queen.

Epoch 3 – School Closing

The 15-year review process which determined charter renewal began in 2014, a year prior to the actual final determination. While the performance of the school across 15 years would be considered, the school's performance from 2010-2011 to 2013-2014 was showcased. Information about the school's early childhood performance is included in Table 4 below:

Table 4

Student Academic Performance Early Childhood – 2010-2014

Grade Levels	2013–2014 Student Enrollment	2010–2011 Early Childhood (EC) Accountability Plan	2011–2012 EC Accountability Plan	2012–2013 DC Performance Management Framework (PMF) Pilot	2013–2014 EC PMF
PK3-2	186	Met 8 of 8 targets	Met 6 of 8 targets	Met 5 of 7 targets	Met or exceeded 10 of 10 indicators

The school's overall performance data on the charter school board's PMF, which incorporates many indicators beyond reading and math proficiency, including academic growth, attendance, and reenrollment, is included in Table 5 below:

Table 5

PMF Performance Grades 3–8 2010–2014

Grade Levels	2013–2014 Student Enrollment	2010–2011 PMF	2011–2012 PMF	2012–2013 PMF	2013–2014 PMF
3-8	125	33.9% Tier 3 (Tier 2 began at 34%)	35.5% Tier 2	40.5% Tier 2	31.1% Tier 3

Table 6 summarizes the determinations of the chartering authority in 2014, whether each

academic program met their respective goals and academic expectations:

Table 6

PMF Goals and Expectations 2014

	Goals and Academic Expectations	Met?
Pre-Kindergarten through second grade		
1a.	PK-2 Literacy Growth	Substantially
1b.	PK–2 Literacy Achievement	Substantially
1c.	PK–2 Math Growth	Yes
1d.	PK–2 Math Achievement	Yes
1e.	PK–2 Attendance	Yes
1f.	The school will meet or exceed the EC PMF thresholds for the emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support domains of the CLASS assessment	Yes
1g.	The school will meet or exceed the EC PMF thresholds for K-2 reenrollment	Yes
2. Third through eighth grades	3–8 Program will demonstrate annual consistent improvement in performance on Elementary School/Middle School PMF, with no PMF score below 40% in the past 2 years; or earn at least 45% of the possible point on the PMF for the two academic years prior to review	No

The 15-year charter review process began in 2014, with my meeting the year prior to the review with a charter board representative to set the school's performance goals. The goals were divided into two groups by grade: (a) PreK-2, and (b) grades 6-8. With the recent implementation of the PMF, a number of charter schools were revising their charters to eliminate testing grades to avoid the risk of closure due to poor test scores in testing grades. We chose not to eliminate grades and set goals for each graded group. While our scores had been consistently low, we met misfortune twice with the chartering authority's implementation of its new school performance rating system, the PMF. Each year the chartering authority would forward the PMF for the school's review prior to publishing results. Each year, there were errors in our PMF reports. Regrettably, I trusted the accuracy of their findings the first year. I discovered an error, but not in time for results to be changed, and the correction would have placed us in the Tier 2 range. Our second misfortune was that the year of our 15-year review was the first year that the chartering authority was using the PMF system to determine charter renewal, and we failed to meet the grade.

The chartering authority recommended that the school's charter not be renewed and recommended school closure. During the Fall of 2014, upon receipt of test scores and analysis of our plight, I scheduled a meeting between my board and the chartering authority. The chartering authority guidance suggested that a school could request to retain a portion of its school and allow some grades to close. We asked the executive director at the referenced meeting for specific guidance to pursue this option. The executive director shared with me and my board that the school could pursue this option and promised to clarify guidance. I submitted the forms required, upon board resolution, to request that the school remain open providing services to grades Pre-K to 2.

The chartering authority staff interpreted the policy in a way that they had never done before indicating that the school would have had to request such separation almost two years prior for such consideration. The charter authority staff proceeded with its recommendation to close the school. The school's attorney submitted a letter requesting the chartering authority's reconsideration, given the executive director of the chartering authority led our board and I to believe that charter renewal for limited grades was permissible. A number of schools had chosen this option without meeting the requirements we were informed we had not met. We even hired consultants to assist us in persuading the chartering authority board to reject the recommendation for charter revocation, advanced by its staff. The fact that both consultants were former staff of the chartering authority did not appear to affect our cause at all.

The 15-year charter review process included the provision of the option to convene a public hearing upon receipt of recommendation of closure. We held a public hearing to a full house of students, parents, community, and staff. I had previously witnessed a number of these public hearings. Only one school retained its charter after the public hearing. With the understanding of the political sentiment that the public hearing would not make a difference and belief that the board of the chartering authority predetermines before the process begins what schools will be closed, I proceeded forward with my best efforts to defend the school's right for charter renewal. It was a David and Goliath situation, with hundreds watching in person and unlimited viewers livestreaming. When I came before the board of the chartering authority, my mouth would become extremely dry. I made sure that I had plenty of water and kept my throat lubricated. I can recall my board commending me for the stellar manner in which I responded to questions by the chartering authority's board members. As a Black female leader, in that moment, I felt alone and more like a subject than an agent of my experience. I believed to be

fighting against enormous odds while the world watched. I felt unfairly treated, as the chartering authority presented inaccurate data about the school, of which we had requested correction. The hearing felt as if we were trying to prove our worthiness to serve and begging the oppressor to continue to exist.

The principal did not respond to any queries from the board of the chartering authority on the academic program, while responsible for grades 1 to 8. An educator two levels below the principal, serving as a literacy coach, responded to academic questions in the way in which the principal should have. Beyond her mandated presence, the principal glaringly detached herself from any association with the school. The principal had served for 2 years and been in the key position to drive instruction and facilitate higher levels of student academic achievement and growth. There had been growth in student academic achievement and growth in the previous year, 2013, under her leadership. A stranger would have assumed her position to be insignificant based upon her invisibility and detachment from the school's fight against Goliath-like circumstances and the odds. A number of current and former students, parents, and staff spoke on behalf of the school. There was one White male member of the community, whom I had never met, that spoke against the renewal of the school's charter.

The chartering authority board voted unanimously to close the school, two days after my 60th birthday on February, 23, 2015. The hearing was public and livestreamed. My personal witnessing of the decision felt like reality TV. I recall many eyes on me following the decision. Most of my board attended the hearing. Trustees from our school expressed regrets and willingness to continue the fight. I greeted another Black female founder who had just received 10th-year approval to continue her school's charter. She extended her regrets. I congratulated her on the continuance and her new grandchild. She shared pictures of the new family addition. It

was serendipitous that this particular leader was the first person I interacted with after the board's final decision, as she was my cohort member in the doctoral program at George Washington University, where she completed her doctorate on time. She was the leader that revealed to me that the administrator that I had hired, 10 years prior, had falsified his credentials. This encounter was an opportunity, as a public Black female leader, to look beyond one of the worst moments of my professional career. While school closure was an outcome that I had feared and fought against for years, my new and improved self, post spinal cord injury and partial paralysis, accepted the finality of the moment, and positioned myself to proceed to the next step of the fight and seek probationary status from the mayor.

The school reform act, upon which the governing and authorizing of charter schools are based, included the option for a school to submit a plea to the state to be placed on probation. The state official who would influence the decision, on behalf of the mayor, was a former charter school founder now employed by DC's new mayor. With the school's attorneys and trustees, I met with our district councilman and subsequently the mayor's appointee to no avail. While the school's attorneys presented compelling arguments, at each turn, the closing of the school was final.

A blessing during this phase was that my board believed in the mission of the school and my commitment to advancing further, notwithstanding challenges and failures over the years. The chartering authority began, months before the review of the charters, meeting with schools that they believed should close. This process was political and not required by the school reform act. Some of these schools lost their charters prior to receipt of PMF rating and subsequent recommendations, as the boards of some schools lacked faith in their school director. One school was started by a Black female for Black male students. The school's test scores in year 2013

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showed the greatest growth of all charter schools. Her students were mostly low achieving Black male students of extreme high poverty and need. Her board gave her an ultimatum to agree to close the school or resign. She resigned, and her board surrendered the school's charter and another school assumed her building, students, and assets. I am grateful that my board supported my efforts to attain a PMF score high enough to attain charter renewal and did not even entertain the political process imposed upon school boards by the chartering authority.

Within the same week of the chartering authority board's vote for charter revocation, a member of that chartering authority board phoned me to advocate for a school of his personal choice, to take over our school, including its students, facility, and other assets. It had become common practice of the chartering authority, to choose a high performing school, as determined by the PMF, to takeover a failing school, as determined by the PMF. The chosen school would inherit the failing school's resources, facility, staff, students, and more. I believed it to be inappropriate for him, as a chartering authority director who had just voted on our school closure, to show bias toward any one school, and approach me to surrender our school to a newly opening school that did not even have a performance record in the district. I believe this director's actions were related to neoliberal education and the unsubtle move toward privatization, imposed by the chartering authority in DC. This director pursued the acquisition of our students as consumer goods and the school as nothing more than a publicly funded private enterprise (Casey et al., 2013). The chartering authority's move to invite private for-profit management companies in to take over existing and start new charter schools in the district was very apparent, to the point of unethical practices. There was no place in this movement for a mom and pop small African-centered community school like Paut Neteru. The chartering authority did not hide its desire to attract private corporations, capable of accumulating large

amounts of capital (Nygreen, 2017), to serve larger numbers of students versus a lot of smaller schools serving fewer students, thus resulting in fewer schools for it to manage.

Schools came out of the woodwork upon public notice of the school's imminent closure, requesting first grabs for our students. If one did not understand the way in which students are commodities in neoliberal education, it was obvious during this phase. Most schools did not bother to express condolences and proceeded directly to request access to our students. Former Paut Neteru staff working at other schools would call the school, seeking a direct line to me, expecting priority access to students given their history with the school. Consistent with transformational educational leadership, I believed it was important that this life altering condition of selecting a new school for their children faced by parents served as an opportunity for empowerment and self-determination (Darder, 2016). I declined all requests for access to students. I arranged public meetings where a variety of schools came to our school, met our parents, and presented their programs.

One school, in particular, with whom we partnered with as part of our Pre-K program hired most of our Pre-K and some kindergarten staff. Other teachers and staff were hired by other school partners. By the end of the school year, all but one teacher was employed for the following year. This reality was a huge relief for me, as I wanted the closure to be as painless for others as possible. As a Black female leader, my primary concern, after working to ensure the smoothest transition for our students, was to protect teachers and staff from the school's closure being experienced as a scar on resumes and careers. This closure process required considerable sacrifice for the betterment of the whole, like a mother sacrifices for her children, consistent with the African womanist approach. I did not begin to consider the implications of school closure on my personal career until at least 6 months after school closure, when students and teachers were

placed, all staff had vacated the building, and the building was placed on the market. Consistent with African womanist and African-centered pedagogy, I believed in the importance of each action serving the good of the community, even at my own expense.

My responsibilities upon final notice of closure, I believed, included: (a) notifying staff, students, and parents of the impending closure and what to expect in the closing months; (b) ensuring the provision of quality instruction through the close of the school year; (c) securing employment at other schools for teachers and staff for the subsequent school year; (d) commencing proceedings to sell the facility and use proceeds to provide severance payments for staff; and (e) proceeding with end-of-year closeout practices, particularly teacher and leader evaluations. I believed it was important to enact critical care as I approached these life-altering conditions for students, parents, and staff (Wilson, 2016). My board approved my request to advance a stay-put incentive to encourage all staff to remain in their positions until the end of school. I also allocated professional development funds to facilitate all staff attending the charter school conference in New Orleans to promote further professional growth and networking opportunities. The incentives, however, did not prevent several teachers from vacating their positions early. This resulted in our middle academy students, particularly, receiving instruction from substitutes from March until early June. The consequence of students losing instruction from highly qualified teachers, as a result of teacher flight upon notification of school closure, highlights both social and material inequities that accompany school closures. Students who are already mostly high poverty, low achieving, and needy of high quality instruction to narrow learning gaps now experience additional days of lost instruction from highly qualified teachers. Teachers and staff, both those who took flight and those who stayed put, faced material

inequities and the uncertainty of the job market. Several veterans, by age and experience, non-instructional staff, remain under or unemployed nearly three years since the school closed.

I submitted a proposal for severance to our board based upon the policy of DC government. The DC government plan awarded severance to employees based upon years of service or age factors. Given the circumstances of school closure and the prospects of securing employment for seasoned staff, I advocated for a package that would award severance based upon age and years of service. The board determined that, given my status as ex-officio member of the board, along with the school secretary who served as the parent representative on the board, the two of us were not eligible for severance. We were separated from the other employees and our payment was referred to as bonuses.

The board approved my proposal, except for my bonus. Due to my years and service, my bonus would have exceeded $250,000. The school attorneys advised the board that the amount was too large for a bonus for a nonprofit employee. The board applied different rules to my bonus, over all bonus and severance awards, and awarded me a bonus that was $5,000 more than the assistant principal would receive, whose position was two positions under my position, and my years of service exceeded hers by 7 years. We were both in our 60s. I felt salt in my preexisting wound resulting from school closure, when the board failed to recognize my service, worth, and impending hardship after over 15 years of selfless service. I was also angered by the attorneys' recommendation, given their knowledge of common practice of nonprofit directors, in DC alone, receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in severance. I could not resist wondering if racist attitudes influenced the board's actions, as the attorneys were White male, and the trustees were Black, including one Black female attorney. Woodson (1933) explained that one way that miseducation manifests is when Blacks view White knowledge and expertise as

superior. I presented an appeal to the board providing justification, including supportive data, for my bonus award being commensurate with age and service, as all others were, to no avail. I secured an attorney who filed a complaint with DC Office of Personnel on my behalf.

Relations between the board and me, for the first time in the history of the school, were strained. I had to continue to convene the board and did so with the utmost professionalism. We had vacated our facility, at this point, thus board meetings were teleconferences. I was relieved to not have to look into their faces. To generate revenue to cover employee bonuses, I requested our mortgage holder to waive our prepayment penalty in the hopes of securing more funds for staff severance payments. The value of the prepayment penalty was over $800,000. The request was denied by the mortgage holder.

Upon the sale of the building, the board approved severance payments to employees and two board members, based upon proceeds of the sale. Since the sale price was less than our asking price and the prepayment penalty had to be paid, proceeds were less than initially projected. While I did not receive what I should have based upon the formula, the board did award a bonus payment to me that exceeded what they initially approved. The board's second action, however, did not erase the pain from how I experienced their first action.

In November 2015, a school board member, whose firm was the school's attorney, expressed alarm that the building may not sell and encouraged the board to dissolve all of its assets and surrender the building to the mortgage holder. This action would assure no severance payments for staff which I was committed to providing. I wanted this generous gesture to serve as my final act as executive director and be regarded as a champion advocate for her people to the very end. I was also fighting for my own personal bonus, given my three mortgages, car note, and other life experiences. To ward off the board accepting his recommendation, I recommended

my own termination and that of the chief financial officer to be effective December 1, 2015 instead of February 2016. The chief financial officer and I were, at this point, the only remaining staff still completing school closure tasks and managing the sale of the facility. The board approved our termination. We worked from December 1 through April, when the facility sale was finalized, without pay, as part-time consultants. We also worked without pay, understanding that we would not receive pay for services rendered between December and forward if the building did not sell. We completed school closure tasks through June 2016, without any remuneration. The chief financial officer modeled exemplary commitment to the school's mission and vision throughout her tenure, and particularly during school closing, as she sacrificed remuneration. Darder (2016) described critical leadership as pedagogy that encourages humanizing inquiry and decision-making where the common good stretches across differences and institutional priorities.

In addition to these tasks, there were mandated closure requirements. The mandated school closure process took over a year to conclude, starting in March 2015 and ending June 2016. School closure tasks, for which I provided oversight and were monitored by a school closure generalist, were divided into the following categories: (a) financial requirements, (b) legal requirements, (c) records, (d) notifications, (e) employees and contractors, (f) SPED, Section 504, and ELL Students, and (g) assets and data collection. In addition to meeting monthly with the school closure generalist and the state representatives, the following tasks were required: (a) fulfilling designated financial and legal requirements; (b) notifications of closure to employees and contract personnel, parents, students, OSSE, nonpublic schools attended by special education students, mortgage holder, vendors, and charitable partners; (c) records—student roster; records custodial plan; and transcripts and test scores; (d) special education—

notify parents, list of students needing ESY, copy of student files to parents, and ensure update of all IEP's and Section 504 plans; and (e) equipment and furniture inventory.

Notwithstanding impending school closure, we chose to operate summer school as we had in previous years for the sake of our outgoing students. Upon the close of summer school activities in August, we commenced in breaking down the classrooms and preparing to dissolve all furniture and equipment. I retained a skeleton team of essential staff to remain past the termination date for most employees to manage closeout duties and hired former students as movers. A closing celebration was organized by my son and one of the founding parents, who also served as our enrichment coordinator. Students, staff, trustees, and parents attended that were part of the school community over the 15 years. Former students attended, some with their children. A number of employees that had been challenging to supervise or terminated approached me with apologies for conduct contrary to the school's mission. Staff shared photos, hugs, dances, and memories with each other. The culminating event was emotional and stirred mixed feelings of sadness with those of gratitude, upon witnessing just a sample of the hundreds of lives that we touched.

We first extended to our employees the opportunity to keep their computers and printers, where applicable. We then notified schools and the community of the availability of free furniture and instructional materials. Surplus equipment was listed for sale at very low prices, as a means of funding school closeout activities. Public and private schools and organizations, including homeschoolers, retrieved surplus furniture and materials to further their aims. The state voiced no opposition to our plan to dissolve furniture and equipment via donations and sales upon receipt of our dissolution plan. When a charter school with whom we partnered offered to purchase six classrooms of furniture and materials specific to their program, they notified the

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chartering authority and state to ensure there were no objections. While the chartering authority had no objections, the state opined that all of our surplus equipment was the property of the state, even though no documentation stated such.

Our school attorneys engaged the attorneys for OSSE to challenge this decision that was late and not supported by any mandate, policies, or procedures. The state's attorney, in a rather rude manner, enforced their interpretation. Our attorney chose not to fight the action during the final stages of dissolution. DCPS schools acquired smart TV's, white boards, and other equipment worth thousands of dollars at no cost that other schools were interested in purchasing. A list of surplus property had supposedly been distributed to all DC public schools, DCPS, and charter. A number of charter schools complained that they never received notice of the availability of surplus equipment. One charter complained directly to OSSE and received the opportunity to take some of the surplus equipment. OSSE was always known to be partial to DCPS schools over charters. Notwithstanding the partiality of OSSE, the process wreaked of shady dealing. These occurrences added more salt to my open wound, given my hopes for a smooth, painless closing. Additionally, we had three school buses with two remaining to be sold. With the new interpretation, the state took over the fleet of buses. The same charter school, with which we had enjoyed an extremely mutually beneficial partnership for several years, sabotaged our efforts to sell our equipment including buses, and delayed the listing of our building for sale by engaging us in preliminary sales conversations with no interest in paying full price.

The same school that hired a number of our staff expressed interest in our facility, even before we secured an agent and placed the property on the market. We lost about two months negotiating with this school for the purchase of our facility. It was determined later in the process that the school was hoping to purchase the school at a considerably discounted price.

The proceeds of the sale of the facility, after paying off our facility debt, was our sole source to provide any type of severance or bonuses to our departing staff, thus we sought full price. A variety of schools considered the purchase of the facility between Spring 2015 and Spring 2016. We received close to the asking price. We were able to pay off the loan and provide nominal severance payments to noninstructional staff.

By the time the school building sold, I had relocated to California and was engaged in four property sale or purchase transactions. I felt relieved to finally be able to move on from the closure of the school. It was hard to grieve the loss of the business, and mostly the loss of the institution and relationships, and heal when I continued to devote energy and expertise almost a year after the last students exited the school. I still sorely miss interacting with and serving the children the most.

By April 2016, I had secured a grant under my new nonprofit organization to administer a mini-grant in DC. I closed on my new home in Los Angeles, CA, one day, and 3 days later, I returned to the East Coast to run the grant I had just received to provide mentoring and psychological services to young women. I commuted to DC from my vacation home in West Virginia until July when the program ended. In July, I returned to my new home I had occupied for just a few days to start the next chapter of my life.

Summary – Personal Experiences across Epochs

Parent Behavior – Effects of Oppression

Most of my parents were Black mothers and grandmothers. The experiences of these Black women intersected race, gender, and status. Most of our parents, after the first few years of the school's operation, did not live an African-centered lifestyle. Some Black parents, unfortunately, projected negative attitudes and behaviors they likely experienced as people of

African descent, as Byrd and Jangu (2009) described, onto others, particularly school leadership and security. Unfortunately, racialization can be experienced when members of the oppressed group assume the behaviors of the oppressor. I, along with other leaders and teachers, experienced numerous violent encounters from parents over the years. I even went to court in response to a Black mother threatening my life. The hearing revealed that she had threatened administrators previously and been charged but did not serve time. The court applied mercy to her for the sake of her multiple children. In my case against this angry Black mother, the courts found her guilty, yet again did not sentence her so her children not would be without a mother. These circumstances challenged my capacity to continue to love unconditionally and serve the children of parents violating the code of conduct in extreme ways. I felt more compassion for these children of parents violating school policies, as the behavior of their parents embarrassed the children. I have had to resolve issues with community police support, where teams of parents fought other teams of parents, disregarding the school's code of conduct and responsibility to provide a safe haven for students and adults.

Each year that our school operated, the students were over 98% Black and a 90% poverty rate. While not being the recipient of major philanthropic and private funding, I wrote numerous grants to secure funding to provide basic community needs including adult education, before and aftercare, extended day, summer school, parent resource center, school garden, free bus transportation, special education services, clinical services, and free meals. I do not believe that our African-centered educational program was found to be appealing to philanthropic and private organizations.

While we opened the school with highly qualified staff committed to the African-centered approach to education, retention of committed staff was increasingly challenging over

the life of the school. Support from those in power was strong in the early years of the school, and waned as the chartering authority experienced tremendous turnover and the school's performance ratings dropped. The school in terms of community was alienated by those in power and on a lateral level with the school, as we were seen as African-centered. As some viewed the school as "too Black," the Pan-African community did not view the school as "Black" enough or independent enough, given we accepted federal and staff funds. Professional development for teachers and leaders was consistently a priority. I wrote numerous grants and secured several partnerships in the education community to ensure ongoing professional development for teachers, leaders, and even the board of trustees. Our children were immensely loved by highly competent staff. Over the years, though, staff were less culturally competent, and inconsistent in viewing the students through a lens of Black pride and high expectations for Black students' achievement and growth. While continuing to deem the recruitment of culturally competent staff important, neoliberal policies like high-stakes testing dominated my recruitment efforts as a Black female leader. I regret feeling pressured to abandon my commitment to ensuring our children received both schooling and educating, as received from a teacher committed to the African-centered approach to education.

Student Behavior – Effects of Oppression

As part of the charter application, I wrote content standards for student conduct or character-building. Our philosophy was designed to inspire the development of students who contribute to society as highly functioning adults. This philosophy is opposite of the racialized neoliberal system that blames students for their plight and positions them for a future of incarceration. Our goals for students included to develop and cultivate: (a) leadership skills and attributes; (b) an understanding of the structural elements of ceremony and appreciation for the

role of ceremony in everyday life; (c) a culturally competent understanding of the role, function, and importance of leadership; (d) a greater awareness of personal history; (e) an understanding and appreciation of the relationship between mind, body, and spirit; and (f) an understanding of social norms and codes of conduct in selected traditional societies. Our code of conduct was strength-based and designed to inspire and recognize positive behavior. Tenets of our philosophy of positive classroom and behavior management included: (a) effective instruction leads to classroom management; (b) be accountable; proper planning prevents poor performance; and (c) affirmative management.

Our philosophy of effective management included: (a) Maat (truth, justice, righteousness); (b) active engagement, reciprocity; (c) student-centered instruction; (d) environment and culture of classroom enhances instruction and motivates student engagement; (e) consistency-well planned good teaching (best practices, research-based, fluid, seamless); (f) flexible uniformity (instructional planning, BBC); (g) no student left unsupervised; (h) teachers personally and professionally effective (professional development/commitment to on-going learning); (i) keep your eyes on the prize; (j) cooperative working environment; (k) multi-modal; and (l) meaning learning. The affirmation/pledge included in our staff and parent handbooks stated: We will, as teachers and learners: (a) facilitate teachers and accountability; (b) speak openly, honestly, truthfully (while watching our words); (c) be home depot; (d) support the team (resources, humility); and (e) model the affirmative method. General standards for community conduct are written in the affirmative, listing first the appropriate behaviors that will be awarded. The four areas of conduct include: (a) respect for self and peers, (b) respect for elders, (c) respect for environment/property, and (d) community service. Inappropriate behaviors and contents are indicated last. We provided, since Year 1, rewards for positive student behavior including: (a)

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awards and recognition; (b) a school store where students could exchange points for prizes, school supplies, and so forth; (c) monetary incentives for perfect attendance; and (d) field trips and travel.

Before adding the middle school, we enjoyed high levels of success inspiring and rewarding positive student behavior, particularly in the classroom. There were isolated events, like the first expulsion that I regretted having to implement in the first years of the school, but the student brought a gun to school. From the first year, over 90% of our students qualified for free lunch. Many of our students faced enormous adversity at home and in their community, challenging their capacity to demonstrate positive and on-task behavior at school. Before we added the middle grades and subsequently a dean of students to lead our aims for positive behavior of the middle grades, the principal managed student behavior. I do not recall many challenges with behavior in the elementary grades, beyond the routine fighting and disruptive classroom behavior.

I do recall our children being extremely hungry all of the time, even with our provision of breakfast, a morning snack, lunch, an afternoon snack, and supper. Our children would beg and bribe other children for their food, stuff their pockets with extra food, and eat as much as possible in the moment. We read this behavior as a sign of other types of deprivation resulting from poverty and oppression beyond the lack of food.

We offered parenting workshops to empower parents to model and encourage positive student behavior at home and school. Few parents attended. Parents frequently used verbal abuse and physical punishment to discipline their children. My office was a distance from the main office and adjacent to the staff parking lot. I'll never forget one morning overhearing a parent cursing her child or children prior to their exit from the car. There were numerous children in the

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car. Later that same day, one of the older children that had been in the car, to whom I believe the profuse profanity was directed, was referred to the dean for refusing to complete his work. When seeing him in the dean's office, I attempted to influence him to return to class to complete his work. Upon his persistent refusal, we called his home. As his father spoke to him, tears began streaming down his face. When I took the phone to speak to his father, his father was still cursing him as if he were a grown peer that had stolen something from him. I spoke to the father and reiterated the student's potential to be great and that we were going to support his successful completion of his class assignments. I recommended to the dean to refrain from calling his parents unless really necessary, as doing so would not serve as positive or effective intervention.

With the addition of the middle academy, grades seven through eight, came a host of new challenges in managing student behavior. We experienced an increase in suspensions in excess of five days and expulsions. We implemented more in-school suspensions to minimize the impact of suspensions on student attendance at school and academic achievement and growth. Oftentimes, along with other school leaders, I hosted students for in-school suspension to minimize student absences from school.

Personally, I believe in the consistent implementation of behavior modification programs versus suspensions. I believe suspensions are lose-lose. Because educational systems can be mirror-images of the societies in which they exist (Asante, 1991a; Hilliard, 1998), Black children educated in a society that does not support their African culture are only seen and see themselves as being acted upon. I believe in an Afrocentric way of leading, centered on a humanist vision (Collins, 2008). It was vital to me that students always felt loved and supported, including when exhibiting off-task behavior. The philosophy of the school principal or dean of students over the years, sometimes varied from my personal philosophy and the school's belief in a strength-based

approach to inspiring positive student behavior. The school's last principal worked to almost create a police state for middle school students, which they rejected with worse behavior. Teachers and leaders knew that my philosophy on motivating positive student behavior began with effective instruction and a positive school climate. This experience illustrates my constant struggle with building and sustaining a shared vision for teaching, leading, and inspiring positive student outcomes.

DC neighborhoods are distinct, and students bring a spirit of territorialism to the school setting. It was not unusual for conflicts between neighborhoods and/or social meeting to spill over into the school environment, sometimes requiring the discharge of community officers. Challenges in maintaining positive student behavior impacted student re-enrollment rates as some parents experienced the behavior of some students as creating an unsafe environment for their children.

I have been threatened by students, though I do not recall ever being afraid of a student. I expelled a middle academy Black female student that threatened to harm me because I suspended her. I adored this student, notwithstanding her defiant behavior toward adults, and regretted her extreme behavior. She returned, a few years later, at the school's closing celebration with her infant daughter. I hugged her and we caught up. Her return, I believed, illustrated the power of an Afrocentric approach to student behavior management and relationships, where she was able to return to a school where she had been expelled from and embrace the principal that expelled her.

We invested considerable resources to facilitate positive student behavior including staffing, staff training, and parenting workshops. We participated in two major programs toward this aim. One program used was a state-sponsored PBIS program that we participated in for

several years. A second program was extensive where a private consultant firm provided training and support to school staff, including daily observations by instructional leaders. I believe we would have achieved greater success toward our aims for positive student behavior had: (a) parents supported the school's character-building or positive behavior and intervention support (PBIS) program, (b) parents attended parenting workshops, (c) parents attended parent/teacher conferences, and (d) classroom instruction been more consistently effective and engaging. The investment of considerable resources toward positive student behavior, as a social phenomenon, was an example of where my critical care style of leadership facilitated my awareness of the need for a shared communal vision that connected positive student behavior to positive student achievement and growth (Darder, 2016).

History of Separate and Unequal Education for Black Children in DC

We sought to serve students most in need when we designed the school. As a Collaborative, we encountered Black children and adults struggling to survive in a marginalized existence. Our collective professions encountered the members of the DC Black community in the areas of education, psychology, prison reform, and social services. Struggles, for Black children and adults, manifested via low academic achievement, high numbers of special education referrals and placements, high poverty, substance abuse and violence, psychological imbalance, and incarceration.

We believed that we could narrow the gaps in the academic achievement of Black students by providing a family-friendly, holistic, African-centered learning environment that supported the whole family and community. Notwithstanding the absence of philanthropic giving, I persistently pursued funding to support programs to ensure the provision of high-quality academic and social services to Black children and their families. The children and families that

we encountered were the descendants of generations of Black children who had been schooled in a separate and unequaled fashion in insufficient facilities. Closing the achievement gap continued to be an uphill and moving target, as state assessments and standards changed and high-stakes testing took precedent. The pressure for students to perform well on achievement tests, regardless if the learning experience was meaningful, compromised the vision to serve Black children and their families in a holistic way as a means toward supporting their journey to be productive citizens.

Issues of Support

I learned, in the first year of the school's existence, of a program of the Black Lawyers of DC to provide nonprofit organizations assistance in recruiting trustees. I applied and we received two trustees that remained until the school dissolved. Both trustees were attorneys and provided considerable legal and other support toward the school's mission. The board of trustees consistently supported the mission and vision of the school via policy. Over the 16-year span, however, just two trustees provided monetary support beyond annual dues. The one trustee who provided monetary support also provided numerous mentoring and computer-based programs for students through his fraternity. A third trustee, who served in the later years of the school, through her place of employment, provided financial literacy programs to middle academy students. Some trustees never paid their annual dues. Most trustees seemed content with my assuming primary responsibility for raising funds for school programs beyond what the per-pupil allocation would meet.

Parent support was best in the earliest years of the school when there were more African-centered parents and lackluster most years. For most years of operation, I funded a full-time parent/community resources coordinator (PCRC). A key role of the position was to facilitate

high levels of parent meaningful engagement and provision of support to parents and families. The PCRC struggled to influence parents to meet with the 30-hour volunteer commitment. We provided numerous incentives for parent engagement including adult literacy program, parenting workshops, and monetary and other recognition and awards. Many and sometimes most of our parents, over the years, did not work, yet did not take advantage of the numerous programs designed to empower them to support their children's academic and social success.

While we solicited feedback from parent stakeholders when major decisions impacting their children were being considered, few parents provided feedback. Feedback would be the result of major efforts via parent newsletter, calls, and face-to-face reminders. Parents would, however, provide sometimes violent and threatening responses of dissatisfaction with consequences of their children's behavior, as governed by the school's code of conduct, to which they were invited to provide feedback, received copies, and consented to support. I understood and accepted then and now the challenges poor Black parents face in raising children. I believed, at the same time, in the importance of expecting, modeling, and supporting meaningful parent engagement for the sake of their Black children.

Byrd and Jangu (2009) stressed the importance of an African-centered school attaining support from those in power, and community to support professional growth and development of educators. The DC Resource Center provided start-up training to prospective and new charter schools prior to the opening of the school and shortly thereafter. I am grateful for the hosts of trainings this organization provided for charter school leaders. As time proceeded and the Resource Center closed, the chartering authority offered more programs for teachers, school leaders, and trustees, while I believe far more were needed. The chartering authority seemed to show more support for high-performing schools, as one of the top chartering authorities in the

United States. Fledgling high-poverty, high-need schools could have used additional funding and professional development support while struggling to meet the new Common Core standards and PMF requirements.

Schools determined by the chartering authority to be high performing, or Tier 1, also failed to lend support and/or share strategies of success with struggling schools such as Paut Neteru. I recall one school that was mid- to high-performing that responded to my requests for support with spirited cooperation. High-performing schools also typically did not face the same challenges as a high-poverty, high-need Black-run school in terms of resources, facilities, philanthropic giving, chartering authority's support, teacher recruitment and retention, and parent support and conduct. As Carter G. Woodson (1933) described the mis-education experience for Blacks in America, Blacks are conditioned to place a higher value on an entity that is White-operated versus Black-operated, as Blacks are conditioned to hate themselves. Black and poor parents surviving a lottery process to attain admission for their child in a high-performing school seemed to show greater respect for that school's policies, procedures, and requirements.

I enlisted a host of programs designed to support the professional growth and development of school stakeholders offered by the state, chartering authority, and private sources. These programs also included support for implementation of common core standards, school improvement plans, positive behavior intervention and support, and state testing preparation.

African-Centered Practice – The Power of Ritual

Karenga (1998) conceived Afrocentricity as a conception of culture where a group functions optimally as a cultural collective, employing its own historical reality to redefine itself,

celebrate themselves, and generate an ethos of which members are proud and which outsiders respect and appreciate. Some (1993, 1994) argued that ritual has redemptive power.

As a personal reflection, I believed it to be critically important for students, at my charter school, to attain an Afrocentric worldview. While world travel, a dream deferred, was one vehicle toward one attaining an accurate view of the world, cultural rituals, I believe, are another vehicle. Asante's (1988) model employs the cultural tool of ideology to encourage an African worldview among African Americans. Vernon Dixon's (1976) description of the African worldview is characterized by a man-to-person axiology versus the man-to-object European axiology. This cultural distinction justifies the use of culture as a means toward meaningful schooling and education for Black children. The Unity Circle was convened school-wide at the start and end of each week, and in the classrooms daily. The Unity Circle was designed to unify the class or school of students, parents, and staff as a collective working toward one aim— holistic student success. Students sang the Negro Anthem and other songs daily to inspire self-pride and self-esteem and reviewed the Nguzo Saba principles. Eurocentric holidays were not celebrated. Kwanzaa was honored as an African ritual tradition. Children were honored and placed at the center of the Kwanzaa celebration. Teachers and students presented creative presentations reinforcing Kwanzaa principles. The Kwanzaa Kinara of seven candles, which bear the African liberation colors, was lit, while further reinforcing the Nguzo Saba principles. Students made gifts for loved ones versus embracing the commercialism of Eurocentric holidays. African foods were prepared and textiles worn.

The children, families, and school community benefited from rituals designed to provide a culturally competent model of community and learning, instill pride, and inspire agency.

Students and staff, often, added their own creativity (Kuumba) to existing songs, affirmations, poems, or expressions.

Support for African-Centered Pedagogy and Practice

As a personal reflection, I attended the first National "Infusion of African and African American Content in the Curriculum" conference in 1990. The exposure to the knowledge shared by the scholars listed above transformed me into an advocate for Afrocentric education for all Black children. I was, at that time, working as a public administrator at an Afrocentric human services firm, and not as an educator. I traveled to Kmt (Egypt) with Dr. Asa Hilliard in 1990, shortly after the conference. My experience attending the referenced conference redirected my professional and personal focus to African-centered education and positioned me to reap the benefits of further teachings of Dr. Asa Hilliard, Dr. Molefi Asante, John Henrik Clarke, Abena Walker and others. While it was not until 1999 that I wrote the charter school application, the seeds for my return to education and the vision to open an Afrocentric school were deeply planted at the referenced conference. This experience expanded my view of my responsibility to work and contribute, as a Black female leader, to ensure Black children received both educating and schooling within a non-Eurocentric framework.

The Collaborative and founding staff showed tremendous support for African-centered pedagogy. The Collaborative showed support throughout the charter application development phase and most members assumed positions on the school's staff and/or board of trustees. As the school faced major facility and staffing challenges, its cultural identity as an African-centered school, was difficult to uphold. It became increasingly hard to recruit quality staff who embraced African-centered pedagogy. It became even harder to recruit quality staff capable of implementing African-centered education and practice in a matter that ensured high levels of

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student achievement and growth. Instructional leaders, during most years, supported both African-centered pedagogy and its effective implementation of African-centered education. The inconsistent implementation of African-centered pedagogy and practice among teachers compromised buy-in from students.

Former students and staff, via social media and other vehicles of communication, frequently share with pride their cherished remembrance of African rituals employed, and now model these rituals with their own families. Some former students even describe themselves as Afrocentric. The DC charter community often placed negative connotations on African rituals employed and my approach as an Afrocentric charter school leader.

Support from the Pan-African community would have been tremendous, given its commitment to African pedagogy and practices. Many of our routines and practices were originated in and/or common with those of the Pan-African community. The Pan-African community, however, did not recognize the school as a part of its community, as: (a) it was not part of the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), and (b) it received funding outside of the Black or African community. There was one Black female charter leader of both an African-independent and African-centered charter school. I purchased her science curriculum when our school first opened, and we supported each other in our efforts to operate African-centered educational programs. On an occasion that the Pan-African community recognized her work in the Pan-African community, she acknowledged me, by name, as another positive African-centered leader. Notwithstanding receipt of support in the Pan-African community, I advertised widely the availability of free computers, furniture, and materials, when the school closed. A number of African-independent institutions benefited from our school's generosity in its closing days.

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The Price of a Dream

Pursuit of a dream to serve Black children and families in a quality and meaningful manner did not come without a price. My love and devotion for the children and commitment to excellence were often recognized by stakeholders, while my posture and actions were often unpopular. With the responsibility of keeping the doors of the school open, I did not have the luxury to forge high-quality relationships with staff, students, and parents at the level that I would have liked. With constant pressure to navigate business-altering scenarios like securing accreditation, relocating the school, overseeing the buildout of a new facility, ensuring compliance with state and chartering authority mandates such as changing standards, state assessments, and numerous audits and reviews, little time remained to forge relationships.

A key element of African pedagogy is the importance of relationships. I believe that quality relationships are integral to student holistic success, including parent/student, parent/teacher, parent/leader, teacher/student, leader/teacher, teacher/teacher, student/student, board/executive director, and school/community. I ensured funding each year for a staff retreat to ensure staff readiness for each new school year. The retreat was overnight most years. Quality time was devoted at these retreats to: (a) school mission, vision, and values; (b) instructional and student behavior and support planning, programs, and routines; and (c) forging positive relationships through fun games and adventures. Middle academy and Pre-K students were required to start school prior to other grades to facilitate student orientation to instructional and school-wide routines and forge relationships with teachers, staff, and peers through fun activities and adventures. The board of trustees also participated in retreats, while not always overnight, given the collective demanding schedules. The board retreated to review school performance;

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engage in planning activities, strategic, sustainability, and business; and forge positive relationships.

In the early years, as traumatic shifts occurred in school location and/or staffing, my relationship with some staff and/or some parents suffered or grew distant. I suffered the loss of close relationships with two founding staff, one of which was never reconciled. For the sake of the school, I led with integrity and compassion, setting high expectations for all staff regardless of relationships. I struggled and some would say failed to maintain some quality and highly valued relationships, as the demands of establishing a new school increased with each day. Some staff over the years blamed me for: (a) allowing parents to re-enroll after failing to meet volunteer requirements, even though I could not legally prevent them from re-enrolling; (b) staff turnover; and/or (c) student behavior, including expecting higher expulsion rates. Chapman (2013) reported in her findings on our school that our teachers and staff frequently commented on how other schools had more control over selecting their student body and, as such, were able to produce better testing outcomes by admitting select students. I can infer that teachers and staff wanted me to abandon our commitment to serving students with the greatest need and break the law, given that these practices are illegal. Some parents blamed me for facility insecurity, staff turnover, and student behavior.

I believed that I had to always put the children first. Fighting for the liberation of the minds and hearts of the children was my activism for social justice and love. My lens was rose-colored in the early years, in that I did not expect the mission to increase in difficulty with each year. I never got to exhale or smell the roses. By the time we purchased our own facility, and no longer had to fret eviction, the years of vicious cycles of ensuring fiscal viability, primarily through student enrollment and effective instruction and instructional leadership within a school

community of enormous need, had taken its toll. I understand now that the journey was not supposed to be rosy. The thorns of the journey taught me that my commitment to children of color and high poverty was a needed cause and worthy of each effort and sacrifice I made and can make, the oppression of Black children and their families is deeply rooted within the system of neoliberal education, far more resources that those I accessed are essential to facilitate the schooling and educating of Black children using an African-centered approach, including funds for psychological support for children and their families, I could have/should have employed a more constructivist approach to my style of African womanist leadership, neoliberal education sabotages authentic efforts to educate children of color, at every turn, and issues of facilities and funding, including neoliberal policies that consider students as commodities, compromise the authentic intent of an African-centered leader.

A Personal Reflection

An article written in the Washington City Paper in September 2000 featured me as a new charter school founder opening a new school. Upon reading the article to ignite my recollection of events that led to the founding and opening of a charter school in DC, the following themes were dominant: (a) my high level of optimism, energy, vision, and competence (as recognized and acknowledged by others); (b) the prevalence of politics of education of Black students in DC, including anti-charter school and anti-African-centered education; (c) perseverance—the way in which the school faced nearly insurmountable obstacles from the very beginning yet would succeed in opening against great odds. The article chronicled my student recruitment efforts for the opening year of the school from zero attendance at the first meeting to a waiting list for Year 1. The article chronicled the challenges of opening a charter school—describing it as a rough journey: (a) dedication, resourcefulness, and commitment on the part of founding

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members and staff (including my son); (b) founders used partnerships with HU, and so on to provide family support services, and so forth; (c) neoliberal policies impact enrollment— enrollment numbers determined half of the school's budget rendering students as commodities at the onset; and (d) facilities—the enormous difficulty of securing a facility and ensuring its readiness and approval for school opening. The article noted: (a) how we were not able to secure space East of the River where our charter application proposed, yet opened on time in spite of having to change facility choices and navigate a facility not ready for student occupancy; (b) that two schools had to postpone their openings to the subsequent year; (c) commitment to families— great effort was expended to explore and meet the diverse and high needs of the students and their families; (d) parent behavior and buy-in—the article provided early signs of the parent behavior patterns that would plague the school for years to come, that is, late responses to requests for information, low participation levels, and so forth, and the school's commitment to high levels of parent feedback, buy-in, and participation; and (e) school's opening supported by chartering authority and charter resource center. The writer was insightful in that the article previewed each of the challenges most impactful to the school's existence and performance over the 15 years of operations.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the shared experiences from the three epochs in Chapter 4 and answers the research questions. A thematic analysis of narrative and documents, presented in three epochs, revealed over 20 themes that were coded for pattern categories. I then went back through the categories and determined the overarching categories and comprehensive classes (Merriam, 2009). The comprehensive classes include: (a) Black Female Leader/Multiple Consciousness – Skills and Expertise; (b) Cultural Context of Black DC Community and Education of Black Children in DC; (c) Understanding My Place; (d) Identity Politics; (e) Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Class and Black Oppression; (f) Racialization of Neoliberal Policies; and (g) Access to Facilities and Equitable Access to Capital for Facilities. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader?

- What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female school leader?

The purpose of Tables 7 and 8 is to highlight the findings organized by research questions and major themes. These findings will be analyzed more in depth throughout the chapter.

Table 7

Findings – Question 1: Social & Material Inequalities

Theme	Finding
Black Oppression	Parent attitudes & behaviors reflected their oppressed conditions
Neoliberal policies shaped numerous inequalities including:	Black female leader was subjected to pressures of securing facility and meeting enrollment targets to ensure adequate funding levels; School had to increase its enrollment ceiling to secure facility financing which compromised the school's original mission to serve 150 high-need students;
	Requirement of schools that receive federal title funds to subject students to high-stakes testing adversely affected high-poverty, high-need school and its efforts to achieve high levels of student academic achievement and growth, and created stress for all stakeholders, students, teachers, parents, administrators, & staff;
	High-stakes testing compromised school's focus on African-centered teaching and learning pedagogy & practice as school's dominating focus shifted to high-stakes testing;
	Black female leader was perceived to represent neoliberal policies as enforcer and monitor of policies such as high-stakes testing; School was perceived as a "failing school" in neoliberal climate of high-stakes testing, regardless of plight and baseline achievement levels of high-poverty, high-need students;
	School, as charter school, was subjected to charter revocation laws as part of school reform act, a neoliberal policy to which non-DC charter schools are not subjected;
	Process of school closure was subjected to charter revocation, including public hearing, which impacted school stakeholders; middle academy students expressed feelings of abandonment by teachers and school.
African-Centered Education:	Teacher attitudes toward African-centered education adversely impacted Black teacher buy-in of African-centered pedagogy, practices, and routines;
	School was perceived negatively by charter community as an "African-centered" school using African-centered pedagogy, practices, and routines.
Black female leader:	Struggled to recruit and retain quality leadership;
	Felt unsupported by chartering authority, as a leader of a fledgling school of high-need, low-performing students;
	Felt isolated, as one of few Black and Black female charter leaders;
	Further isolation was felt as one of few African-centered charter leaders.

Table 8

Findings – Question 2: Lessons Learned

Theme	Lesson
African-Centered Leadership	Ensure a strong system of community and private support for pedagogy & practice that honors approach to educating Black youth;
	Forge positive relationships with those in power & those to be empowered;
	Build & sustain professional learning community, using constructivist approach, creating a trusting environment for students & staff;
	Embrace and empower parents, students & community;
	Possess the resiliency & fortitude to withstand fierce opposition from varying stakeholders & those in power;
	Ensure alignment of personal beliefs, self-esteem, & epistemology with the developed institutional vision & values;
	Set high expectations for leadership, staff & student performance based upon holistic, non-Eurocentric norms;
	Provide teacher training that supports effective teaching in a non-Eurocentric learning environment.
African-Centered Education	Facilitate Black students' acquisition of academic success, cultural competence, and a critical consciousness;
	Continue to explore how non-European children can be educated in a way that places them at the center of their learning, builds agency, and develops them into creative & critical thinkers & future builders;
	In fight for educational & political equality for Black children and their families, further research on & practice of the application of culturally relevant pedagogy to facilitate Black students' acquisition of academic success, cultural competence, and a critical consciousness

Black Female Leader/Multiple Consciousness

As a personal reflection, my mother is the first Black woman leader that I encountered. She was a leader in her home, church, and community. Her leadership strengths include vision, intelligence, humble approach to influence, respect for others and the opinions of others, commitment to and savvy in community mobilization, strong ethics and integrity, organizational

efficacy, belief that people are innately good, and a genuine love for children, family, people, church, and community. She was loved and highly respected in and outside of her community. My mother was a housewife, and my father was the breadwinner, until she went to work when I was in the 8th grade after the steel mill my father worked in closed. She devoted considerable time to ensuring that her family, church, and community received the best that could be offered. as one of her three children, I accompanied her to most meetings that she attended, as she kept her children close to her. I am so grateful that I was able to observe the dynamics of organizations at a young age, while I did not enjoy it then. My expectation bar is set extremely high for my service and how organizations and systems should function, given my mother's exemplary example.

I stand on the backs of mighty African woman education leaders such as Bethune, Burroughs, Brown, and Collins, committed to using education as a tool of racial and social liberation and empowerment for Black children (Bair, 2009). As a Black woman leader, I faced the challenge to serve my community through the lens of multiple consciousness, considering race, culture, national, economic, and political factors. My leadership style reflected African-centered principles of leadership including: (a) Maat (regain, reconstruct and recreate a cultural integrity that espouses reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, and order; (b) Nguzo Saba – Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith); (c) celebration and uplift of Black roots; (d) fight for racial equality and against oppression; (e) children are our greatest reward and reflect the state of our community; and (f) leader as healer. It is a part of my history and legacy to fight for the underserved. With every breath that I borrowed, I struggled to liberate the hearts and minds of Black children using an

African-centered holistic approach. I was committed to leave an imprint on students to become academically competent, culturally knowledgeable, and socially attentive to the community. This aim was reinforced through providing programs such as rites of passage, mentoring, out-of-school time (OST) activities, Saturday school, extended year, and service learning.

Within the African diaspora, the African woman serves the role as healer, creates her own paradigm, and defines herself within an African-centered context (Hudson-Weems, 2004). I chose to define myself as an African-centered educator using the paradigm of an African-centered approach to fight for a better humanity for all by serving the under- and un-served students of DC. While not a trained healer, love was my healing language, in addition to always ensuring that clinical services were funded and the emotional well-being of students was considered and served. Chapman (2013) described African-centered schools as serving a healing and restorative function for the numerous injuries sustained by the Black body and psyche as a result of centuries of oppression and marginalization. African-centered schools, Chapman explained, operate as agents of empowerment and identity construction for the Black families and youth they serve.

In the era of neoliberal education, women of color, grapple daily with dilemmas of leadership and authority. Reflection of my leadership performance and positionality as a Black female leader revealed numerous examples of ways in which racialization and oppression created unwelcomed and unfavorable dilemmas of authority/leadership that compromised my African-centered/humanist beliefs, including: (a) expelling students who violated the code of conduct in reaction to their victimization as racialized and/or oppressed subjects; (b) terminating teachers who failed students/performed inferiorly as a result of their own self-hatred; (c) upholding principal decisions against students who perpetuate racist attitudes toward children of color; and

(d) valuing, evaluating, and making decisions about students and teachers based upon neoliberal policies such as high-stakes testing.

I aimed to blend my experiences, awareness, and action to empower Black students to reach their highest good and subsequently serve humanity as functioning adults in society. I experienced enormous challenge, within and outside of my own identity, to serve in such an exemplary fashion. The history of my experiences, I believe, grounds my social activism as a Black woman leader. These experiences are grounded in strong spiritual and family values and sense of community, African-centered pedagogy and practice, academic scholarship, commitment to service, hope for a better future for our children, and unconditional love for children. Like my mother, I am a nurturer. Throughout this lived experience as a Black woman leader, I have nurtured and inspired deferred dreams, children, parents, professional staff, and an entire professional learning community. My strong ethics positioned me to lead with integrity, providing an exemplary example for others.

Black women, I believe, intuitively know how to meet the needs of the Black community in concert with Black men. Notwithstanding my difference in class with the community that I served, I possess the historical experience of what poverty looks like and the issues that pervade poor families, thus successfully reached parents and children across class. Even when at odds with parents, mostly Black mothers, or when I was seen as representing the "man," I was seen as authentically concerned about the wellbeing of children and their families. Parents also respected that fact that my son was educated right alongside their children, even though he could have attended a private school.

My struggles as a Black female leader within an Africanist womanist framework (Hudson-Weems, 1988) were grounded in African culture, as I worked for the benefit of the

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whole community. I took seriously my responsibility to celebrate Black roots and the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of Black womandom, exuding nurturing, compassion, and strength. I view my struggles as part of a broader struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice for the Black community (Collins, 2008). As a Black female researcher, my attempts to secure data on charter schools founded by Black females or Black educators failed, with available data focused on the ethnicity and gender of teachers and students in charter schools.

Cultural Context of Black DC Community and Educating Black Children in DC

Having grown up outside of DC and never worked in the DC educational community, I only learned of the cultural context of the Black community in DC 10 years prior to opening the school. As a mother of a Black student attending DCPS and charter schools, I received a glimpse of the poor state of public education in DC in the early to mid-1990s. As a relatively new DC resident, I attended DCPS board meetings, town hall meetings, Advisory Neighborhood Commission meetings, and school-based parent meetings. Conducting research in 1999, as part of developing the charter application, revealed current demographics about the DC community and the educating of Black children in DC. I understood the gross and systemic poverty levels of the District. I underestimated, however, the lingering effects of the crack drug epidemic on the Black community, as some of my first students were the grandchildren of crack-addicted adults. Other social ills plagued our families. Many of my students' parents that were incarcerated had drug or violent related charges.

I understood DC had not been successful in attaining statehood. I underestimated how the lack of statehood would perpetuate an oppressor/oppressed existence, stall efforts for education reform, and impact me as a leader of a charter school whose funding allocations and the timely

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issuance of such allocations were under control of the Congress. It was just recently, as part of this research and literature review, that I learned of the full extent to which Black children in DC have received a separate and unequal or no education since its first free colored students attended private schools founded by freed slaves and private funding. DC has a 200-year history of public and private schools where local schools organizations and governance were controlled by the Congress and structured around issues of race (Anderson, 2000). Included in this history is a lack of faith on the part of Congress on Black leadership in DC schools (Anderson, 2000). I underestimated the depth of underachievement of Black students, rooted in two hundred years of racist and/or failed policy (Anderson, 2000). These are examples of social and material inequalities that shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader in DC.

Understanding My Place

In 1999, I was so excited and encouraged to re-enter education and make my mark as a change agent in the lives of Black children and their families. As I review the history of educating Black children in DC or the lack thereof, and the timing and placement of my entrance into the charter school world, my lens was rose-colored. While I dreamt of accomplishing so much more, I believe that our school made a positive and powerful difference in the community. Past students, parents, and staff affirm the school's positive contributions with conviction. A number of former students, including my son and two twins featured in the Quick Study in 2000, returned to work as summer youth workers, teachers, and teacher assistants. Sankofa is an Akan principle that reflects the importance of learning from the past. I believe that while the result of school closure might have been the same, had I better understood the history of education for Blacks in DC, I might have been more realistic about and less indicting of my efforts to serve the DC community.

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The odds were stacked against me as I battled woes symptomatic of neoliberal education, such as facilities, high-stakes testing, and student and staff recruitment and retention. Our school psychologist used to apply the comment "timing is key" to many situations. My timing was off in the beginning and end of my journey as a charter leader, as: (a) in the beginning, as I was attempting to secure a facility, DCPS and the chartering authority were battling against the conversion of a DCPS school to a charter school, resulting in my declining the first facility offer that I received; and (b) at the end, being reviewed for charter renewal during the first year that the PMF would determine a school's fate.

As I reflect on this lived experience, I guess I survived it, but at what cost? I am more, in the midst of this self-reflection, concerned about the Black children that I may have failed or that I cannot now serve that thrived in the safe haven we provided, than my individual circumstance. While I have not worked in two years, and the way in which the chartering authority closed our school was highly political and, I believe, unfair, I just want all children to achieve their highest good. So much work remains in the fields of education, social justice, and social work than to devote time to residual emotional wounds.

Being an educator and Black female school leader is far more than a job or career; it is a calling and responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2004; Loder, 2005). hooks (1994) described the calling for womanist educators to be to use education as a movement that does away with boundaries and makes education the practice of freedom. I remain firm in my belief in my calling to serve my community, using all the formal and informal tools I have received, from my lived experiences.

Identity Politics

The benefits associated with the school's African-centered identity include: (a) cultural identity for students and staff; (b) students received an accurate history of the world; (c) leaders, teachers, and staff could instill in students racial uplift and pride; (d) the approach inspired creative and critical thinking; (e) African-centered principles, practices, and routines inspired development of self-knowledge and individual gifts for the betterment of community and spirit; and (f) the approach encourages love for all humans, other creatures and honoring of nature and spirit in daily life (Byrd & Jangu, 2009).

The challenges that accompanied adopting an African-centered pedagogy and identity were numerous. DCPS had a superintendent, Dr. Andrew Jenkins, who embraced Afrocentric education to the level of creating an assistant superintendent for an Afrocentric education position. I was one of five candidates who interviewed for the position. He was fired before he could fill the position. Dr. Jenkins believed he was voted out in 1990 due to his desire to introduce an Afrocentric curriculum. The succeeding superintendents, Franklin L. Smith, General Julius W. Beckton, Jr., and Arlene Ackerman, did not share the same enthusiasm for Afrocentric education as Dr. Jenkins. Upon assuming her duties in 1997, Ackerman would soon battle the chartering authority executive director against the conversion of one her junior high schools to a charter school.

While we were not discouraged from adopting an Afrocentric approach to educating our students, during the charter application process, the charter community never encouraged the use of the approach for existing or future schools. The chartering authority would, for the school's performance review visits, secure a so-called "Afrocentric expert" to serve on the review panel. Such inclusion is the extent of support for the African-centered approach on the part of the

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chartering authority. Staff of the chartering authority was reported to have made comments about the school being an undesirable place to work because we were Afrocentric. From time to time, I spoke to other of the few Afrocentric charter leaders about collaborating for professional development and other activities. The grind that accompanied the task of keeping the doors opened challenged my ability to carve time for initiatives not related to student academic performance and high-stakes testing. Both lack of support and insufficient time to collaborate with other Afrocentric leaders are examples of social inequalities that I experienced.

The greatest challenge we faced implementing an Afrocentric approach was the task of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers who embraced the pedagogy and were willing to infuse the practices in daily instructional and non-instructional activities. The school's first teachers provided rigorous instruction and implemented the African-centered curriculum and approach to education. Most teachers hired after the first 4 years of operation did not embrace the African-centered approach to education at the level of authenticity desired. Chapman (2013), in her qualitative study of our school, found that the majority of the school's teachers reflected one or more of the following sentiments: (a) African-centered education was not a priority for African American children; (b) African-centered education will limit Black children's ability to appreciate difference and excel in diverse environments; (c) our school promotes a false reality for students and does not prepare them to function well in the world; and (d) they question the contemporary relevance of African-centered education. As part of her study, a minority of the school's teachers and staff deemed the issue of African identity as fundamental to producing educational and long-term success (Chapman, 2013).

Prior to having to place high-stakes testing over all existing aspects of the school's emphasis, time was devoted daily to infuse the African-centered approach into academic and

nonacademic activities. Consistent and authentic implementation of African-centered pedagogy and identity were compromised when NCLB legislation, a neoliberal policy, was enacted, placing a much greater emphasis on student success on high-stakes testing versus academic achievement and growth in concert with holistic development.

Our identity as a charter school placed us in a compromising position when encountering the DCPS and African-independent school communities. DCPS has been strongly anti-charter since the first of its schools converted in 2000. I never bought into the divisive mindset perpetuated, given that both DCPS and charter schools were public schools. Most importantly, DC students floated between DCPS and charter schools with great frequency, sometimes within the same school year. My premise was that we serve the same students, so let's work together. Notwithstanding the attitudes, I faced the negativity and participated frequently in state sponsored trainings and activities that were mostly attended by DCPS schools. As a Reading First school leader, I engaged regularly with DCPS professionals. Over time, the emotional effect of the negative comments, looks, and gestures lessened. DCPS professionals often felt that charter schools were politically catapulted, as part of NCLB, to "rescue" Black students from a failing DCPS district, and formerly DCPS students would attend charter schools then return to DCPS where they started. I really empathized with how these professionals felt about charter schools. Students in DC often bounced between systems. DCPS or public schools, however, were subjected to the same requirements of NCLB as title fund recipients. Additionally, DCPS professionals did not face closure due to low test scores, as I did.

Intersectionality of Race, Gender, Class, and Black Oppression

Leonardo (2013) spoke of the "foreverness" of racism. As I use self-analysis and self-reflection to identify specific examples of social and material inequalities, I believe I experienced

more the daily lived experience of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. It is possible that I do not remember microaggressions targeted toward me because of my race, gender, and/or class and/or that of my staff and students. As racial microaggressions are typically directed toward marginalized people by Whites, my environment was mostly comprised of Black people.

I was never able to attract philanthropists that donated millions of dollars to charter schools in DC. Was it because my students were Black, or that I was a Black female, or that the students were poor and/or Black, or all of the above? As I encountered experiences that did not positively serve myself or my school community, I wondered if the problems were caused by racism, sexism, both, another issue, or simply a personality conflict (Orbe et al., 2002), as the oppressions interlock to be experienced as a "multiple consciousness" (King, 1990).

As a school described as Afrocentric, we were caste as outside of the mainstream and thus not considered by some as candidates for some of the programs, sponsorship, or philanthropy that might have benefitted our students. I am grateful for the few organizations that approached us for partnership notwithstanding our approach to educating our students. I believe these organizations recognized my professionalism, competence, commitment, diligence, and fight for an improved school and higher academic achievement and growth for students. My pro African-centered approach did not impede my ability to engage professionals from all fields and ideologies in any way.

I believe that Black female teachers responded more favorably to the two Black male principals we had, as a part of their learned experience as oppressed Black women, to expect to be dominated by males. hooks (2015) traced this behavior to when enslaved Black people accepted patriarchal definitions of male-female sex roles.

The effects of oppression were visible in the faces and lives of my children and those of their parents. Chapman (2013) described poverty and lack of resources as vividly real for many of the families that I hosted. African American women face systemic oppression based upon both race and gender. Our Black mothers faced the daily struggles that accompanied being Black, female, and often singly responsible for providing for their children. I believe that our children and parents very much wanted to discover their best selves. I believe that our parents loved their children and wanted to support their academic and social success. I believe that the weight of oppression, manifesting as hunger and poverty, abandonment, substance abuse, violence, family dysfunction, lack of safety and belongingness, absence of value, and hopelessness proved unbearable, even with the hosts of services we provided to thwart these villainess outcomes of oppression. Research shows the high correlation between poverty and school performance (Kozol, 1991). After the school closed, I founded a nonprofit organization, after observing the impossibility of poor children overcoming academic gaps when oppression dominated their lived experiences.

Underestimating Neoliberal Policies

Our school was just opening in 2000, as an outcome of neoliberal policies included increased measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing. My experience with this practice at our school aligns with research that describes the impact of high-stakes testing ranging from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008). As NCLB sought to address continuing savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) such as the perpetuation of the racial achievement gap, the high drop-out rate of Latinos and African Americans, ongoing school violence, and the lack of qualified teachers in high-need areas, we experienced firsthand three of these four factors. Kozol (2005) argued that NCLB

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manifested itself as a part of a larger structural framework that fixates on Black bodies as problems.

NCLB Legislation was enacted after the Collaborative chose to open a school designed to serve the lowest performing highest need students in DC. Schools receiving federal funds under NCLB were required to subject students to high-stakes testing and succeed in closing the achievement gap. As I school leader, I embraced this goal of realizing higher levels of student achievement and growth at our school.

Chapman (2013) observed educators, parents, and students at our school negotiating contestations that produced a tension in the school environment of which all community members were acutely aware. In her research findings on our school, Chapman discussed how the discourse of NCLB and neoliberal education dominated the school environment in such a powerful way that nearly all of the conversations she had with teachers, parents, and staff, invariably came back to the themes of competition and selectivity.

Chapman (2013) reported that our teachers and staff frequently commented on how other schools had more control over selecting their student body and, as such, were able to produce better testing outcomes by admitting select students. I can recall, over 10 years ago, being at a leaders meeting hosted by the chartering authority when a school admitted to its inappropriate screening of applicants. The chartering authority staff representative publicly reminded the charter school leader that, technically, those practices should not be followed, while the school experienced no consequences and remains open today.

Over the years, I pondered if it was political suicide to continue the aim to serve those with the greatest need in the neoliberal era of increased accountability as measured by high-stakes testing. While I may have privately shared the desire for a student body more balanced in

terms of academic performance and growth, and thus enjoyed an easier road to high levels of school performance, I knew that I could not and would not abandon those students who other schools screened out of their enrollment process. I certainly was not going to implement the shady enrollment policies that many of the higher performing DC charter schools employed. I believe that we were spiritually and culturally called to serve these children, as Black educators focused on and committed to the critical care and effective schooling and educating of Black children. It would have helped to have received additional resources and support for special needs and low achieving students from the chartering authority and the state.

Both ongoing school violence and the lack of qualified teachers at our high-need school impacted our capacity to ensure positive achievement and growth for students. Our children were more impacted from violence in their homes and community, while such violence easily carried over into the school environments, including while on field trips and being transported to and from school. As a leader, I insisted that we always had a full-time school psychologist, unlike most small charter schools in DC, and quality business and community partnerships to provide clinical support to students and their families. Even with constant investment in positive behavior intervention supports, violence in the school seemed perpetual and rooted in a systemic history.

In the early years, our African-centered family-friendly school succeeded in attracting high-quality teachers committed to uplifting Black students. With the facility shifts, increased enrollment, leadership changes, and high-stakes testing, our school climate shifted. Our second location, Hamer, was far less intimate and challenged our capacity to recreate our "village" and safe space for students. Teachers at our second location faced, poor facility conditions and reduced support from parents, in addition to year-round high-stakes testing preparation.

As the chartering authority responded to NCLB and its need to better measure school performance with assigning tiers to schools, our school rating floated between a Tier 2 and Tier 3, with more Tier 3 ratings. Our efforts to recruit quality teachers were impacted adversely by our school rating as a "failing" school, notwithstanding having over 95% poverty students. Few charter schools had comparable poverty levels to our school. Teachers who joined us realized and hopefully appreciated the way in which we valued teachers and provided ongoing substantive and exemplary professional training and travel.

In line with the mandate to subject students to high-stakes testing, I developed a value-added or high-stakes evaluation system, for teachers and leaders where teachers were held accountable for the performance of their students. In hindsight, this value-added system may have unfairly judged teachers with low performing students who would, with the highest percentage of growth possible, not test on grade level. I bought into the system with all my heart, fighting to keep the school open for the children I so loved, and perpetuated the use of Black children as objects. As an educator, I did not believe that high-stakes testing would prove friendly to children of color. High-stakes testing was required as part of accepting federal/title funds. I needed these funds to serve the children and, at the time, charter renewal was determined mostly by student performance on state tests. I believed teachers would welcome the increased accountability and feel incentivized to work harder for our students. I did not know another way to motivate and inspire teachers to help the school jump the complex and ever moving targets of a neoliberal education system.

DCPS received a per-pupil allocation for all students in the District. DCPS schools did not have to rely on the per-pupil allocation to the extent that charter schools did, as facilities, facilities maintenance, transportation, and recreational facilities expenses did not have to be

secured. The requirement of charter schools to secure their own facilities added to the pressure of assuring enrollment targets were met. School enrollment determined the amount of a school's facility allotment. Our need to secure facility financing required the school to abandon its initial vision of serving 150 students and secure approval to grow to 540. These are examples of how neoliberal policies created social and material inequities that impacted my journey as a Black female charter school leader.

Leonardo (2013) described ways in which schools maintain race at the expense of students with color. Schools are part of how race is maintained through race's educative function. Educators teach young people the naturalized status of race and its foreverness on a daily basis (Leonardo, 2013). Segregation studies explain that in a racialized social system, most Blacks attend school with other Black children, tracked with respect to one another rather than with Whites (Massey & Denton, 1993). My students, in addition to attending school with all Black students, descended from generations of Black students who received no or inadequate access to high-status knowledge and, for the most part, attended segregated schools (Anderson, 2000). DC's history of segregated and unequal education for Black students and underfunded facilities, as controlled by Congress, positioned, DC Black students to suffer greater as victims of neoliberal education, given no state control of education.

Access to Facilities and Equitable Access to Capital for Facilities

In 2000, there were far fewer facilities available for schools to occupy than the demand. Concurrently, a heated battle between the superintendent of DCPS and the executive director of the chartering authority resulted in two distinct interpretations of the DC School Reform Act as it pertained to the availability of surplus school buildings for public school use (DCPS and charter). This battle resulted in our renting a nonschool facility from a landlord that provided us,

in year four of operations, with only a 30-day notice to vacate, due to sale of the building. The first facility that I identified in 2000 was less expensive and was a DCPS facility shared by multiple charter schools. Given the referenced battle between school leaders, the chartering authority strongly discouraged me from the accepting the lease for the DCPS facility space. I chose not to make a politically ill-advised decision as the first major decision for the school. As I reflect back at the decision I made in 2000, I really did not have an option but to pass on the offer for DCPS space without committing political suicide with a leader already ensued in heated battle. I guess that made our school collateral damage and subjected to a social and material inequality, as the politics of the circumstances rendered economic implications.

Our founding aim was to operate a school of 150 students, providing intensive family-friendly community-based educational and holistic support to high-poverty, high-need families. I cannot resist imagining the extent to which our high aims of service might have been met had we been able to secure an existing DCPS building, like Hayes Elementary, that remained vacant for several years beyond our initial need for space. A 5- to 6-year lease of a DCPS facility might have provided us the opportunity to retain students, stabilize and increase student academic achievement and growth, secure financing to purchase a facility, and avoid the adversity that accompanied receipt of a 30-day notice to vacate and subsequent occupancy of a school facility insufficient for the thriving of school programs and services. An extremely inexpensive lease arrangement, such as the one acquired by another charter school founded by a White male, might have resulted in savings that could have been applied toward purchasing a facility sooner. We likely would have still needed to increase our enrollment to secure a loan to purchase a facility. I wonder about another scenario where we might have secured a 15-year lease with DCPS, eliminating the need to purchase a facility altogether and thus being spared of the most

challenging feat that I faced in increasing our enrollment and keeping the doors of the school open for 15 years.

DC charter law did provide a facilities allowance, unlike many chartering authorities across the United States at the time. Access to funding for facilities would have been an even greater hardship without the facilities allowance which was based upon the per pupil allowance. Many charter leaders, at the time, believed that the facilities allowance formula should have accounted for the high cost of real estate in the District which, one might argue, was a material inequality. We were fortunate to have bought and sold a school in DC, given the market in 2000 and 2016.

While one might argue that we survived three major facilities hiccups, our aim was to thrive and serve our community in an exemplary manner. These hiccups included: (a) a 30-day notice to relocate a school in 2004; (b) emergency occupancy of a facility with infestations, poor HVAC, and unsafe conditions for students in 2004; and (c) a 6-month delay in occupying our newly purchased facility in 2007.

Our facility woes seriously impacted our ongoing plight to provide services in the following ways: (a) the first facility was not in Southeast DC, where we proposed to serve in our charter application; (b) the first facility that we occupied was not a conventional school building with classrooms and traditional school space; (c) our second occupancy was rushed and unplanned due to the provision of short notice to vacate; (d) each relocation shifted our school climate; (e) each relocation impacted our efforts toward student re-enrollment and total enrollment; and (f) teachers and staff retention and satisfaction were impacted by poor working conditions. These facility woes dominated considerable amounts of my attention that could have been devoted to effective school leadership, effective teacher and leader development, sustaining

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a professional learning community, sustaining business/community partnerships, world travel for students, and other initiatives integral to the school's mission and vision. As my inability to remain focused on key schoolwide goals persisted, overall academic school performance fluctuated and/or faltered.

Implications

Significance of Findings

In Chapter 1, I suggested that this study might prove useful to women, particularly women of color, aspiring to social justice leadership and continuing to demand social justice from within and for women and poor children of color. As a charter school leader, I integrated African-centered pedagogy with African womanism as tools for social justice. This study provides implications for educators aspiring to use non-Eurocentric pedagogy and practice as tools for social justice and educating youth of color. It is my hope, also, that this study sheds light on the social complexities that compromise education daily for children of color, particularly poor Black children. It is my hope that this study exposes the challenges of implementing an African-centered curriculum or non-Eurocentric curriculum in a Eurocentric education model in the neoliberal education era. While the challenges of serving marginalized students are great, and my journey was an uphill climb from beginning to end, it is my hope that educational leaders aspiring to start a school using a non-Eurocentric framework will be inspired by my experiences and learn from my victories and challenges.

Given the manner in which racialized educational practices are interwoven in educational pedagogy, instructional approaches, and practices, I believe it is critical for a leader aspiring to offer students a non-Eurocentric practice to consider the following lessons that one can learn from the obstacles and experiences that I encountered during my journey as a Black female

charter school leader: (a) ensure a strong system of community and/or private support for your pedagogy and practice; (b) ensure that you have the holistic resiliency and fortitude to withstand fierce opposition from varying stakeholders and those in power; (c) ensure your personal beliefs, self-esteem, and epistemology are aligned with the developed institutional vision and values; (d) forge positive and effective relationships with those in power and those to be empowered; (e) possess skills to create a trusting environment for students and staff, and use a constructivist approach to build and maintain a professional learning community; (f) possess a willingness to assume no ownership to the entity that manifests from your initial vision; (g) possess the ability to love and appreciate Black children or children of color, with high expectations for students based on international standards, not the Euromerican norm (Byrd & Jangu, 2009); (h) ensure the provision of teacher training that supports teaching in a non-Eurocentric learning environment; (i) embrace and empower parents; (j) fight poverty; and (k) hold on to a dream.

This study provides women and educators of color an illustration of the use of autoethnographic method as an ethnographic inquiry to use autobiographic materials as primary data, emphasizing cultural in interpretive orientation (Chang, 2007). The autoethnographic method allowed me to mesh my personal with the cultural aspects of my experience, to shed light to the issues that face Black children, Black educators, and the Black community. Shujaa (1994) reminded us that the fight to educate African Americans and achieve full educational and political equality has persisted since at least the age of integration. Shujaa described the fight as a battle for an equal and level playing field in all areas of human endeavor. This study shares my story of joining this fight for equality for Black children. My reflection strengthens my resolve to continue to fight for educational and political equality for Black children and their families.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

Asante (1990) maintained that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have more motivation for school work. Twenty years later, I believe that this premise still holds true for children from all cultures. Future research could explore how to enhance the fight against neoliberalism and develop successful policies and practices that ensure non-European children are educated, not just schooled, in a manner that places them at the center of their learning, builds agency, and develops them into creative and critical thinkers and future builders. Enhancing the fight against neoliberalism must include strategies that facilitate access to private and/or public funding for non-Eurocentric centered education that does not ascribe to the capitalistic tenets of neoliberalism. This study suggests further research on and practice of the application of culturally relevant pedagogy to facilitate Black students' acquisition of academic success, cultural competence, and a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Research could be explored to examine why the majority of African American teachers in the later years of the study did not embrace African-centered education and the effects of Eurocentric teacher preparation programs on African American and other educators of color.

Shujaa (1994) believed it to be the responsibility of each adult generation of African Americans to ensure the existence of an educational infrastructure for transmitting knowledge to their progeny. To that aim, I believe there are opportunities for research in exploring what collective practices can be developed to determine what cultural knowledge is to be transmitted, assess the extent to which cultural knowledge is being transmitted to Black children or children of color, and create new resources of cultural knowledge. Practitioners could use collective

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practices developed to transmit knowledge, using a holistic approach, to students of color and all students. To advance educational practice, African-centered principles derived from traditional African and African-centered sources could be used to support leaders and educators, as well as serve as guidelines for the socially just education of people of African descent (Byrd & Jangu, 2009). African-centered principles could also be used to explore research designed to promote the development of environmental health, while engendering peace and well-being for all people (Byrd & Jangu, 2009).

Another research opportunity may be to explore what leadership models and approaches can best serve students who are high need in a neoliberal era or the extent to which there are models of schooling, educating, and leadership that can penetrate and undo the harms of racialized education on children of color. There are research opportunities for Black woman leaders, researchers, and reformers, with the positionality, commitment, and passion to devise and implement systemic, equity-oriented educational solutions for Black students.

Other potential research topics may include: (a) blending critical care and African-centered approaches to educate Black children, (b) investment in Black children, (c) sexism in education, (d) Black female leader/multiple consciousness, (e) classroom and student behavior management/expectations for slave management, (f) school-to-prison pipeline, (g) Black womanist leaders-tracing the motherline, and (h) the impact incarcerated mothers have on the achievement of their Black children.

A Final Personal Reflection

It is the present, March 2018. Three days after submitting my first dissertation draft to my dissertation committee chair, I am in DC. It is the first time I have been in DC in 8 months. The Paut Neteru story and relationship connections and encounters are moving and revealing. I am

the guest of one of the school's two incorporators, founding staff and trustee. The other incorporator suggests my attendance at a premier viewing of a film, *Footprints of Pan Africanism*, and I reunite with her later. I retrieve my mother-in-law, a founding trustee, who is now 102 years old, and bring her along to the event. Upon arrival to the event, I see the Baba who founded an African-independent school, adorned me with my African name, and is the recipient of surplus computers, furniture, and instructional materials donated by the school. I see next a priest, who received surplus furniture from the school. I then see a former grandparent of the school, and he brings me current with his grandchildren. I see and greet a founder of one of the African-centered schools closed prior to ours. His school was closed abruptly and outside of any performance review or other review criteria, as were other schools.

As we are seated, I greet a colleague of my son's father. Later, I ask him to take the pictures we wish to use to capture a precious moment shared between friends and loved ones. As he stands to take the photo, I am nearly brought to tears, certainly crying happy tears in my spirit, to see him wearing a hoodie from our school. He shares his surprise that it took me so long to notice. My heart was touched to the core that this well-known teacher/scholar/psychologist and HU graduate saw fit to wear a hoodie from our school even over his alma mater, as we were at Howard. He shares that his young daughter questioned his choice in fashion, given her awareness of his affection toward his alma mater. He explained that the hoodie is one of five of his favorites that he rocks. While to the reader this gesture may seem small, his wearing of the hoodie, for me, symbolized a continued memory, presence, respect, and adoration for the contribution made by the school to the community. I am not even aware of how he attained the hoodie, as he was not directly affiliated with the school, while we did gift guest contributors with school-monogrammed items. What is important was that this scholar of African-diasporic renown, seen

via his participation in documentaries, had chosen his symbol of his affiliation with our school to be among his top five.

The final connection occurred when the filmmaker, as part of her answer to a question from the audience upon the conclusion of the film, expressed regret when neighborhood schools, struggling to serve the unserved, are closed because the schools fail to meet the current political requirements. I felt as if she were speaking specifically of my circumstances. She may have been aware that most African-centered charter schools had been closed by the chartering authority over the course of some years, leaving only two remaining. Attendance at this event, after having moved away 2 years past and 3,000 miles from the community, provided warm feelings of love, appreciation and confirmation that the mission, while determined unworthy to continue another 15 years by those in power, was gallant, valuable, and accomplished, even if not fully realized.

Epilogue: "If I Can Help Somebody"

A song, performed by Mahalia Jackson, and written by Alma Androzzo (1945), captures the spirit of my dreams and intentions that this study of my personal journey along life's way serves to help others in their quest to liberate the hearts and minds of children and fight for social justice for those who cannot help themselves. I have dissected, analyzed, and shared the social and political inequalities that shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader. My soul looks back and wonders about the unfulfilled dreams of freedom, purpose, and peace of my family and African diasporic community. As part of my life's experience, I have learned that the actualization of collective dreams is an incremental and ongoing process. This study offers a snapshot of one journey toward collective freedom, purpose, and peace, realized for my family, diasporic community, and humankind. It is my hope to have created a picture of myself through the use of the autoethnographic method of study in borderless containments called race, sex,

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gender, and culture, fixed within the time and space of my human social experience starting, operating, and closing a charter school as a Black female leader (Alexander, 2013). I engaged in the explication of my lived experience, within the cultural context of an African-centered education experience as a Black female educator. I discovered the numerous occasions where my identity became plural and placed me betwixt and between parties to and/or with whom I served (Alexander, 2015).

True to an autoethnography, it is up to the reader to construct meaning from the events that I have shared (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015).

Prior to my status as a student at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), I had "all but dissertation (ABD)" status from George Washington University for over 15 years. Universities could benefit from examining the way in which the School of Education at LMU provides dual tracks for doctoral students, with both tracks providing dissertation completion support, and one that provides the opportunity for doctorate completion for ABD students.

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